

ANJANEYA

Ramayana

Telugu Original:

D.S.R. ANJANEYULU

Translator:

R.M. CHALLA



Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams

ĀÑJANEYA RĀMĀYANAM

by

R. M. Chella



Published by

Sri S. Lakshminarayana, I. A. S.,

Executive Officer

Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams

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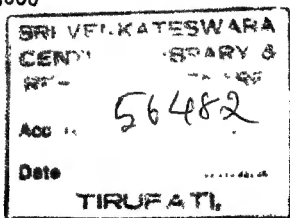
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by
R. M. Chella

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FOREWORD

The Ramayana is a story of rich imaginative excellence, moving sentimental sweetness, and lasting philosophical profundity. It is an outcome of Sage Valmiki's intuitive insight into the very core of human heart - its aspiration and endeavour, its love and languishment, frustration and fulfilment. Besides being the earliest work of ornate poetry, Valmiki's Ramayana, like a prism, reflects the varied facets of Indian culture.

The excellence of thought and expression has won Valmiki a place among the greatest poets of the world. The Ramayana is a vast and fathomless ocean, and as years go by new aspects of the Epic strike the reader and the writer. Valmiki's immortal work has inspired countless poets, playwrights and men of letters to produce works, major and minor on the Ramayana.

Over the centuries, the Ramayana has grown in stature and influence, and become the treasured possession of the people, as perhaps no other poetic composition in the world. Vast scientific, economic and social changes have not diminished the interest in the Ramayana.

Sri R. M. Chella has presented the book "Anjaneya Ramayana" in a new hue. His style is lucid and his sincerity transparent. Nothing of importance in the ethical and spiritual teaching of Ramayana is left out. The book is not a literal translation, nor a heedless condensation without an eye for the great things the Purana brings out.

The book is really a moving summary of the epic and the author deserves all praise. There is no doubt that this will prove a boon to those who have no access to the original.

TIRUPATI, }
April 10, 1985. }

S. LAKSHMINARAYANA I. A. S.,
Executive Officer
T. T. DEVASTHANAMS.

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INTRODUCTION

Rāmāyaṇa— the story or the abode or the pilgrimage of Rāma— symbolises the sempiternal quest of man to find himself, to realise his individual identity with the universal reality.

Man's birth, in the very nature of things, results in death. But the existence in between birth and death is of the essence of Eternity. The mortal coil is endowed for a while with a span of life, which comes and goes. Even this transient life is located in the Life of Life, *Prāṇasya Prāṇah*, as the Upaniṣad depicts the Absolute entity of godhead.

The formless, nameless God 'descends' *avatarati* into the world of form and name to ensure the ultimate triumph of Good over Evil— both of which fundamentally make up human existence.

Inasmuch as one form of life is food for another— *Jīvo jīvasya jīvanam*—, the spirit of envy, fight and conflict always motivates the living creature's actions.

When the hunter killed one of the loving bird-couple, he was merely engaged in an activity that came to him un-thinkingly, selfishly, and yet naturally. It was up to the sage to view the deed from the thoughtful, selfless and supernatural standpoint. At the same time, the sage's *śoka* (grief) does not resign itself to mere wordy cursing but reveals itself in a spontaneous *śloka*.

In point of fact, the very message of *Rāmāyaṇa* can be summarised by this transformation of individual grief into an epic of universal benevolence, for *śloka* also signifies the all-merciful, all-loving nature of the Grace of God.

Each single character in *Rāmāyaṇa* is portrayed with the final goal in view, and not one of them can be condemned for his or her actions. Enough has been said about Rāma's sense of filial and kingly duty, of Sītā's ideal womanhood, of Lakṣmaṇa's brotherly love and of Hanumān's devotional spirit of service. What is not so

well known is the fact that every one who dies at the hands of Rāma typifies the benefit of expiation. Ranging from the noble Ahalyā (from the Vedic viewpoint *Ahalyā* stands for 'Night'—*ahāni liyamānatayā rātreḥ*— and 'Indra' for the 'Sun' who drives her away—*Jiryati*—, as the Vārttikakāra comments on *Ahalyāyai jāra*, to the ignoble Rāvaṇa, all of them attain Salvation.

Every enemy, by word or by implication, accepts the treatment meted out to him or her (even the much-criticised killing of Vāli is only a 'punishment', which ensured sinlessness to both Rāma and Vāli—for when the punisher, who should punish, punishes, and when the one, who should be punished, is punished, it is only the just effect of just cause—*kārya kāraṇa siddhārthau*).

In presenting yet another translation to the wide world of English-reading public, the aim has been to offer something which was not already offered.

There have been doubtless, authoritative verse renderings and readable prose adaptations. But one may say without fear of contradiction that a prose translation, which completely preserves the original *spirit* of Vālmiki, while taking certain needed and justifiable liberties with the *letter* of his first ever poetic creation of the literary world, has not yet appeared.

Mr D. S. R. Anjaneyulu, the writer of the original Telugu version, may not be a 'pundit' in the strict sense of the term, but he has been blessed with an uncannily apt insight into the soul of Vālmiki. One may say that his very christening has been pre-ordained, for in rendering the story of Rāma into Telugu he was preternaturally imbued with the dedicated devotion of Hanumān to Rāma.

The translator had occasion to read Rāmāyaṇa in the original and in its translations in eight languages. In choosing *Āñjaneya Rāmāyaṇamu*, he was solely guided by its exclusively appropriate faithfulness to Vālmiki. It may be added that the present translation has been done, not merely with the help of the Telugu original but also with the constant consultation of the Sanskrit source book—*Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*.

Translator

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DIVINE RAPTURE

Then all of a sudden Lord Viṣṇu, along with his divine consort, disappeared. Soon four fairy princesses, accompanied by a lovely lady, presented themselves on a lotus-seat. All this was ■ mystery to Nārada. Confused, he was simply staring aimlessly.

Suddenly a deep quiet pervaded the whole atmosphere. Smiling splendidly, and casting benevolent glances on him, the girls seemed to be benignly blessing him. And yet, all that happened remained inexplicable to him.

Realizing that Lord Śiva alone was capable of solving this riddle, Nārada proceeded to Mount Kailāsa.

There he gazed with admiration at the majestic Himālayas, the mountain peaks standing in supreme grandeur, sanctified by the penance of sages and gods, hoary with tradition and covered with soft ice. He reflected on the immense benefits the land of India reaped from this gigantic crown of the earth--- the great river Gaṅgā that nourished the land and the people; the very structure and situation of the mountain which stands guard over the whole country as ■ natural fort.

And there, on top of this world-crowning throne, was seated Lord Śiva, rapt in meditation. How blissfully inspiring was his appearance! His whole figure smeared with sacred Vibhūti (charmed ashes taken from sacrificial rites), his forehead adorned by the moon and his hair bedecked with river Gaṅgā, he was an eternal image of peace and purity, light and love, sweetness and sacrifice. Even the ferocious snakes twisting around his torso looked like symbols of the poisonous hatred that was quelled by the God on behalf of his devotees. Verily, evil creatures would become good ornaments when they touch this divine figure. And in this well-poised posture, he was supremely beaming with his power of knowledge, the power of knowing all about the past, present and future of the universe.

Ah, yes! And there, too, is that noble goddess Pārvatī, the daughter of the Parvata (Mount Himālaya), the ever-present *better-half*, the mother of the cosmos sharing the left half of the

Lord's frame, the merciful mother bestowing plenty on her universal progeny.

Oh, how lucky was Nārada to be able to see in flesh and blood the primal parents of the universe! So he began singing their praises. Thereupon the divine couple were pleased with him.

Lord Siva with ■ gentle smile on his lips, accosted Nārada: "Well, Nārada, you keep roaming about the three worlds. There can't be any secrets unknown to you. And you are not one to call on people without some purpose. Now, tell me, what's wrong?"

Nārada informed the Lord of the reason for his visit. Again, smilingly, Śiva said: "Nārada, Lord Viṣṇu, along with Lakṣmī Devī, went down to the terrestrial region in order to kill Rāvaṇa. He will assume ■ fourfold shape in the form of the four sons of Daśaratha, the king of Kosala. Lakṣmī will be found inside a ploughshare by the king Janaka. She will be named Sītā (one who emerges from ■ ploughshare), and will be tenderly brought up in Janaka's palace. She will be married to Rāma, the eldest son of Daśaratha. Obeying the orders of his father, Rāma accompanied by Sītā and his brother Lakṣmana, will leave for the forest regions. There Sītā will one day be abducted by Rāvaṇa. Rāma will kill Rāvana and save Sītā. On returning from his exile, Rāma will be crowned king in splendid style. Rāma and Sītā will have twin sons, Lava and Kuśa. Rāma, by precept and practice, will establish the rule of law and order all over his kingdom. By the mere utterance of his name, men's sins will be washed away.

"The chanting of *Rāmanāma* (name of Rāma) is the only means of getting rid of the dread, disease, pain and poverty of the mundane existence. Even a great sinner can attain salvation by steadfastly praying to Rāma."

Nārada asked: "Where is to be found such ■ sinner?"

Śiva laughed and replied: "Well now, you can see such a profligate on your way back. He is plunged in the mire of ■ mighty sin. Please instruct him in the singing of *Rāmanāma*. Thereafter he is sure to obtain liberation from his evil ways."

RATNĀKARA

Nārada took leave of Lord Śiva, and with the intention of testing the power of Rāmanāma put on ochre robes like a mendicant sage. On the way, ■■ he was taking rest under ■ banyan tree, ■ highwayman named Ratnākara appeared before him.

Ratnākara's parents are god-fearing and pious old Brahmin couple. Because of a curse on him, Ratnākara had to adopt the profession of ■ thief. Killing and robbing wayfarers and travellers, he was looking after the needs of his parents and his wife. He was such an ignoramus that he could not realize that committing theft was a crime.

As soon as the sage came under his sight, Ratnākara was pleased with the chance of getting his booty, and getting down from the tree-top from where he was keeping watch, he aimed his weapon at Nārada's head.

Well, would Nārada, ■■■ immortal inhabitant of Heaven, be easily frightened? He merely laughed at the missile, and it stopped automatically where it left the thief's hands. Ratnākara was taken aback and, awe-struck, stared at Nārada. Realizing this one to be the sinner Śiva talked of, Nārada said: "Well, what is your name? Who are your parents? Why did you choose this evil profession? Didn't your elders warn you against this sinful act? Or didn't you obey them? Is it right that you should torture innocent passengers and sacred saints? For whose sake have you resorted to such crimes? Would they share with you the effects of your sins?"

Ratnākara found Nārada's words to be of a strange nature. He replied: "Sir, my ■■■■ is Ratnākara. I come of Brahmin stock. My parents are very old. We are all troubled by poverty in several ways. You seem to be an unimaginative person. I don't leave unhurt even one traveller who passes this way. I rob them of all their possessions and feed my family with the booty. Why would not my people share my sin's effects with me? Now, I am going to kill you and take away your ochre robe."

Nārada warned: "If you really want to kill me, you must take great care. When my body falls on the earth not even ■■ ant must perish. No one else will share your punishment as ■ result of your

evil actions, and you have to bear it all by yourself. Now, first go home and ask your family whether they would suffer along with you your punishment for your crimes. If they agree to do so, you are welcome to kill me. I will wait here till you come back."

Then Ratnākara said, "All right, but don't try to run away. No one can escape from my clutches with impunity. I shall just go home and inquire from my people whether they would share my sins, and come back right away." As he went on his mission, he was still afraid the sage would run away, and was casting suspicious glances behind.

Going home he first asked his father: "Sir, I am looking after you with the money I rob from passers-by. Please let me know whether you will share with me the after effects of my evil deeds."

His father angrily retorted: "Son, I never heard such nonsense. Would any father stoop to such folly? When you were a helpless child, I looked to all your needs with what I earned by the sweat of my brow. Now I am old and decrepit. So it is your responsibility to take care of me. Did I ask you to torture people for my sake? So why should I share the fruits of your evil?"

On putting the same question to his mother, she said: "Son, what an idiot you are! Who can pay back his debt to his mother? I gave you your life. It is because of me that you are able to see the light of day. So it is incumbent on you to care for me. I never encouraged you in your evil ways. Therefore I have no need to share their evil effects."

On approaching his wife with the query, she replied: "Sir, I am your wedded wife. You have the duty of feeding and clothing me. It wasn't I who provoked you to set about your unwise actions. So I need not share their evil consequences with you."

Ratnākara was sadly struck by these thankless words of the very people for whose sake he resorted to so much evil. He thought: "Really I am a wretch and a rogue. Mine is a stony heart. Else, why would I have taken to all my evil ways?"

Thus repenting and lamenting, he returned to Nārada and asked him supplicatingly: "Revered sir, I am a fallen man. They

for whose sake I sinned refuse to share my punishment. Kindly let me know the way out of my predicament. If you cannot, I shall put an end to my wretched life with my own weapon."

Having said those words, he began beating his head with his weapon, as a result of which blood started oozing from his head and drenched his whole body. After a while, he fell down unconscious.

Verily, Ratnākara was suffering for his sins then and there. Can any one escape from God's retribution? Nor can Ratnākara.

He regained consciousness after a little while. Slowly approaching Nārada, he penitently said: "Lord, thanks to you, I am blessed with true knowledge. I shall always be grateful to you. I will never again undertake sinful actions. So please save me."

Nārada replied: Ratnākara, be at peace. Go and bathe in yonder river. When you come back I shall show you the way out of your predicament."

Pleased, Ratnākara went to the river, but there was not a drop of water in it. The various creatures which were taking shelter in its cool waters were now out of breath and suffering agonies of death. Trembling at the sight of that woeful scene, Ratnākara returned to Nārada and lamented: "O great seer, I am a mighty sinner. At my very sight the river went dry. All the water creatures are enduring the throes of death. There is no way out for me. Death alone is my refuge."

Taking pity on him, Nārada sprinkled a few drops of water on him, and whispered in his ear the command to chant the name of Rāma. But the word 'Rāma' could not be articulated by Ratnākara's lips, try as he would. His throat was getting dry. Thereupon he again begged Nārada: "Sir, from my sinful mouth that sacred word is not emerging. What shall I do?"

Nārada urged him to manage to chant the blessed name with repeated effort, for there was no other way to salvation than through prayer to Rāma. Saying those words, he took his departure.

Ratnākara settled down to his life of repentance, and after continued endeavours managed to chant the name of Rāma. In the

process he was able to achieve such concentration as made him unaware of his surroundings. In his deep meditation he was not conscious of either sun or rain, duststorm or cyclone. Thus many years passed by.

After a long period, Nārada found himself passing that way again. There he saw an anthill, which was surrounded by thorny bushes. From inside that anthill was heard a low, weak voice uttering the name of Rāma. There was no sign of life anywhere nearby. Taken by surprise, Nārada began to reflect and then remembered that it was at this very spot that he once ran into Ratnākara, that it was under the nearby tree he took shelter, and that it was here he advised the sinner to chant the name of Rāma. He realised that Ratnākara must have begun his meditation there itself, and that as the seasons rolled by he was covered by this anthill.

VĀLMĪKI

Returning to the heavenly kingdom, Nārada beseeched Indra to see that heavy rain fell upon that anthill for ■ week at ■ stretch. Indra acceded to the request. Consequently, the anthill was dissolved. There was to be seen Ratnākara in the form of ■ skeleton. Life was still throbbing in that skeleton-like form. But all his flesh and blood became food for the ants. Only the bones were left unhurt.

Ratnākara was still meditating on Rāma.

Then Nārada said: "Ratnākara, your penance has borne fruit. Your life has become sanctified. You are released from your sins and have become one of the greatest of God's devotees. Oh, how marvellous is the power of Rāmanāma!"

Ratnākara was still in his trance of self-realization.

Then Nārada sprinkled sacred water on Ratnākara, upon which Ratnākara regained consciousness and became whole. Rising up from his position, he fell at Nārada's feet and said: "O great sage, I am eternally obliged to you. I know not how to pay my debt of gratitude to you."

Nārada was pleased with his words. He said, "Well, Ratnākara, this is not at all my prowess. This is all the good effect of chanting the name of Rāma. Since you have come out of the anthill after your penance, from today, you will be known as Vālmīki. The same Rāmanāma, which has banished your ignorance, will be useful to absolve the sins of mankind for all time. It is now incumbent on you to write the story of Rāma and to make it popular all over the 'three worlds. So start right away your composition of Rāmāyaṇa."

Then Vālmīki replied, "O merciful one, how can I ever dream of writing a mighty epic like Rāmāyaṇa? You know very well, how an illiterate like me dare not undertake such a gigantic task. You are asking me to do all this for fun. Besides, I do not even know the story of Rāma. Then how can I really hope to compose this great epic?"

Then Nārada said, "Vālmīki, you will soon realize that all the branches of knowledge are at the tip of your tongue. You will attain the power of composing this classic work without any conscious effort. Metrical verses will come impromptu from your mouth. Write each śloka on green leaves. They will develop into ■ great epic. Even as you write, so will Rāma's future history evolve. Your own work will be the pointer for his future. Now stretch your tongue." So saying, Nārada wrote ■ few charmed words on his tongue. From then onwards Vālmīki turned into a great poet. Vālmīki acknowledged his gratitude to Nārada.

To perform his evening prayers, Vālmīki went to the river in the vicinity. There he was feeding himself with the forest fruits and roots. Beneath a banyan tree, he began meditating on Rāma with concentration.

On a certain afternoon Vālmīki went towards the Tamasā river, along with his disciples, to perform his midday ablutions. On the way he came across a hunter. It is but natural that the sight of ■ hunter should fall on innocent prey. He soon saw a pair of cranes, upon a tree, engaged in the act of love. Without noting the impropriety of his action, the hunter aimed his arrow at the male partner. As a result of that hit, the male bird fell dead upon the earth. Vālmīki was pained at the sight of that innocent bird's death, which was caused by the cruel hunter.

BIRTH OF VERSE

Then turning his glance on the hunter, Vālmiki admonished him: "You cruel hunter, what harm has the crane couple done to you? How could you bring yourself to kill this male partner? Look! There is that female partner; how she is crying for her husband! Is it your sport to separate such loving couple? You are ■ heartless fellow. Otherwise why would you stoop to such evil? Just ■ you have made this bird suffer, so may your own wife suffer!"

Vālmiki's heart melted. He could not bear the sight of the suffering female crane. In spite of himself, from out of his sad heart, through his inspired mind, came out certain words:

*Mā niṣāda pratiṣṭhām tvamagamaḥ śāśvatīḥ samāḥ,
yat crauñca mithunād ekam avadhīḥ kāmamohitaṁ..*

Following Nārada's command he wrote those words on ■ green leaf. Verily they turned out to be a metrical poem. Calling his disciple Bharadvāja, he explained the meaning of the poem. Then suddenly Brahmā arrived on the scene. Sage Vālmiki went up to him and welcomed him with due respect. Later, as Vālmiki was pondering over the śloka (verse) that came from his lips effortlessly, Brahmā smilingly told him, "Vālmiki, that really is ■ rhymed śloka; it is indeed a sacred word. It is because of my blessing such a powerful verse has come out of your mouth."

Brahmā went on to address Vālmiki as follows:

LAVA AND KUŚA

"This is the saga of Rāma, the eldest son of Daśaratha, the most renowned of the kings of the Solar Dynasty; of the brothers, Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata and Śatrughna; of his mother Kausalyā and his aunts Sumitrā and Kaikeyī; of Sītā the blessed daughter of Mother Earth and the foster child of King Janaka; of the wedding of Sītā and Rāma; of the exile of Rāma, along with Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa of the abduction of Sītā by Rāvana, who carried her away to Laṅka; of how Rāma killed Rāvana and took back Sītā; of the divine qualities, power and strength, truthfulness and thoughtfulness, selfless service, and dutiful majesty of Rāma; of how Sītā

gave birth to heroic twins in your hermitage; of how you taught the twins the epic of Rāmāyaṇa; of how, singing the story of Rāmāyaṇa, Lava and Kuśa approach Rāma and win his admiration; of how, later, Lava and Kuśa conquered Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata and Śatrughna, who came down into the forest to protect the sacrificial horse; of how, at last, Rāma returned to Ayodhyā along with Sitā; and of Rāma Rājya, the kingdom of Rāma in which the people at large were content and happy with their lot. Write this epic in a sweet and simple style. You alone are capable of undertaking this mighty task. May the Lord God bestow on you the power to compose this great work. May this Rāmāyaṇa you write be read by all mankind for ever, with faith and devotion!

"As long as the holy Himālayas stand, as long as the sacred rivers Gaṅgā, Yamunā, Sarasvatī, Godāvarī, Kṛṣṇā and Kāverī flow, may this great epic of Rāmāyaṇa exercise its influence on all humanity! May the name of Rāma drive away the sins of all who utter it and may they be blessed with wealth, health and salvation!" As soon as Vālmiki finished writing Rāmāyaṇa he decided upon propagating it all over the world. To that end he was wondering with closed eyes, who would be the best suited. Then he felt someone at his feet. As he opened his eyes he saw two boys of the hermitage before him.

Those boys were handsome and graceful. They fully took after their parents. In them exuberance was personified. They were waiting, with a smiling countenance, for the sage's order. They could grasp any subject by merely hearing it once. They had already learnt all the tenets of philosophy and the scriptures. They also looked like Gandharva boys who had imbibed at birth the arts of music and dance. They indeed were Lava and Kuśa.

Vālmiki's joy knew no bounds. Then he told those boys, "Dear children, I have completed the composition of the story of Rāma, the mighty scion of Ikṣvāku dynasty, the incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu. It is my earnest desire that this epic story must be broadcast all over the world for the edification of mankind. I was just now wondering who could be the right person for this purpose. Then I saw in my mind's eye such children as you. It would seem that it is the Almighty's wish that you should present yourselves before me just now."

Then Vālmīki made the two boys sit down at his feet, and taught them this inspired story of Rāma in the form of a melodious ballad to be sung tunefully. Since they were capable of learning anything by just hearing it once, they could memorise the whole epic right away. Vālmīki himself taught them how to narrate the story to the accompaniment of music and dance. The boys were pleasantly surprised at the splendour and imaginative content of the epic. They were determined to prove that they are disciples worthy of their Guru (teacher). At the sage's request, they began to sing the story of Rāma, while dancing to the proper tune. Vālmīki was enraptured. Tears of joy flowed from his eyes.

Then Vālmīki called up an assembly. It indeed was ■ gathering of the greatest scholars of the kingdom. Receiving the blessings of their mother, and following the orders of their teacher, Lava and Kuśa sang the story of Rāmāyaṇa splendidly and won the hearts of all those who gathered there. They presented the story of Rāma as though it were a picture before their eyes. The pleased members of the assembly presented the boys with many valuable gifts---among which were flowers, fruits, shawls, vessels, deer's skin and the like. Admiring and congratulating Lava and Kuśa, the sages went back to their respective hermitages.

The news of this incident spread everywhere. The people of Kosala Kingdom heard that Vālmīki wrote the story of their beloved king Rāma and were eager to hear it.

Lava and Kuśa would wake up early, finish their morning prayers, eat their breakfast, and adorning themselves with trinkets and anklets, they wander about singing the story of Rāma. By nightfall, they would get back to the hermitage of Vālmīki. The people who heard them were very much pleased with their narration. When the boys brought to him the news of the crowds that would surround them, the sage was very much gratified.

After a while, Lava and Kuśa had the wish to see the capital of Kosala, Ayodhyā. The sage accepted their wish. They also took leave of their mother, and proceeded to Ayodhyā. On the way they went singing the story of Rāma with boundless joy.

The city of Ayodhyā is the home of wealth and prosperity. Under the reign of Rāma, all the people were enjoying both

freedom and happiness. Entering the city the boys began singing the story of Rāma in the main square. A multitude began gathering around them. What beautiful music and wondrous dance they gave forth to warm the hearts of the crowds! Hearing their songs, the cuckoos were ashamed of themselves. Seeing their dance the peacocks lost their self-respect and ran away. As for the ecstasy of the crowd, it cannot be described in words. Nobody knew who those children were. All those who heard the story of Rāmāyaṇa shed tears of joy. They did not like to leave the boys, and begged them to accompany them to the court of Rāma. The boys had a great desire to see Rāma but they are the children of the warrior (kṣatriya) race. So they cannot go anywhere without proper invitation. They did not attend the court, but took rest for the night at the public inn and the next morning went back to their mother, in the forest.

Later they received an invitation from Rāma through messengers. The boys were very much delighted. They accepted the invitation and sent word to Rāma that the royal court should be assembled by evening. Hearing this news, Rāma was pleased and accordingly arranged for the court to assemble in the evening.

Rāma's court was filled with the knights and the people, and with the members of the royal household. On a raised platform, precious carpets were laid. Green leaves and lovely garlands adorned the threshold. Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata and Śatrughna have taken their respective seats.

As soon as these smiling boys entered the court, ■ tremendous cheer went up. The boys were indeed blessed. Rāma could see his features in Kuśa and those of Sītā in Lava; so did Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata and Śatrughna. All this was a great mystery to them. Their eyes were filled with tears of pathos.

Lava and Kuśa, before singing their story, prayed to their teacher, Vālmiki. Beginning their performance with due accompaniment of their musical instruments, and to the beat of their anklets, they swept the whole audience off their feet with their soul-stirring presentation. All those who heard them found themselves transported to the seventh heaven of delight. Their eyes were filled with tears of rapture and their voices became

hoarse. As their stares were concentrated on the boys, Rāma got down from his throne and sat silently among the audience. Nobody observed this fact.

Then Rāma asked Lava and Kuśa to sing their story in the ancient tradition of "Mārga". The boys raised their voices and sang ecstatically their narration in unison. The court lost itself in thrilled rapture. They complimented the boys on their tremendous feat. Rāma embraced them and presented them with precious gifts. But the boys did not accept them. They merely took the needed food for the night. The narration of Rāmāyaṇa ■■ that night ■■■ remembered by the listeners all through their life as the greatest happening in living memory.

BĀLAKĀṆḌA

The progenitor of the Ikṣvāku dynasty is Vaivasvata. He is the son of Sun-God. Therefore his race is called the solar dynasty. Just ■ the word 'Om' is the origin of the Vedas, so also the Vaivasvata is the root of the warrior race (Kṣatriya).

King Daśaratha came of such mighty stock. As his conquering army, led by chariots of invincible strength, went in every one of the ten directions, he got the significant appellation of Daśaratha (the hero owning ten chariots). He was ruling over the kingdom of Kosala with Ayodhyā as capital.

The city of Ayodhyā is on the banks of Sarayū river. The river is 96 Yojanas (yojana= 12miles) in length and 26 Yojanas in breadth. Water flows in it all through the year. That city was surrounded by a high fort. On its ramparts, many fierce weapons studded with iron pieces were placed. That fort cannot be penetrated by the enemy.

The city of Ayodhyā had broad streets, planked on both sides by large trees giving cool shade to the passers-by. There were beautiful parks all over the town. For the tired citizens there were marble benches in the park. There were also beautiful lakes filled with pure water. The towers reached up to the sky. Inside the fort there were several diamond-studded jewels made of gold, which were exquisite samples of artistic beauty.

There was no dearth of milch cows in the city. There were thousands and thousands of huge elephants and speedy horses. There is no other city in the world which can bear comparison with Ayodhyā in its riches and majesty.

King Daśaratha, seated on ■ throne studded with the nine varieties of gems, under ■ white awning, was reigning over the people, with truth and justice as his motto. A ministry composed of eight members was advising him. The ministers were always

alert and saw to it that no traitorous elements disturbed the peace of the state. One could not come across ■ single thief in the whole kingdom. All consumer goods were available at a fair price. The people were contented and were enjoying peace and prosperity. Several neighbouring states came under the suzerainty of Daśaratha. All the people of the land loved him like their father. He, for his part, loved them like his own progeny. He was prepared to make any sacrifice for their benefit. His fame spread far and wide.

But what use is much wealth and fame for a man who has no offspring? Unfortunately, Daśaratha had no children. That was why he had no peace of mind. "*Aputrasya gatirnāsti*" is an edict which says that a man who has no male offspring has no chance of salvation. Therefore king Daśaratha was besieged by distress.

Then sage Vasiṣṭha, on considering the situation, advised the king to perform Aśvamedha (Horse-sacrifice).

The king summoned his ministry and subordinates, and told them that he proposed to perform the Aśvamedha in order to placate the Gods and obtain children for himself. They were all pleased with the king's words. Then Sumanthra told the king in solitude, "Lord, formerly I was told by sage Sanatkumāra that you would perform the rite of Putrakāma (wish for male offspring) under the aegis of sage Rṣyaśṅga. It is my belief that both this rite of Putrakāma and the sacrifice of Aśvamedha can be successfully performed under the guidance of that sage. A stallion of noble breed was brought forth for the purpose of Aśvamedha. They adorned his mane with a golden plate proclaiming the universal overlordship of Daśaratha and sent him to wander all over the world. It was followed by the army and cavalry of redoubtable power. They would fight with anyone who would arrest that sacrificial horse's progress.

To venture to obstruct the progress of that stallion is to invite upon oneself the wrath of its protectors. It took nearly one year for the horse and his guard to roam about all the countries of the world and return home. But in performing such a mighty sacrifice several obstacles would naturally crop up. That is why it is not within the reach of each and every king. One must be very careful till that sacrifice was performed without failure. It was such ■

sacrifice that king Daśaratha was intending to perform. Many other kings and subordinates were invited to see the grandeur and splendour of this Aśvamedha. Sage Vaśiṣṭha, the chief priest of Daśaratha, decided upon performing the sacrifice on the banks of river Sarayū.

On the northern bank of river Sarayū several pandals were constructed. Many artists and sculptors were invited to build ■ marvellous Maṇḍapa (raised platform). On the walls of the Maṇḍapa ■■■■ depicted the heroic exploits of the kings of Ikṣvāku dynasty. It ■■■■ the perfect image of all the artistic heritage of that clan. There, under the shelter of the erected pandals, the kings and feudal Lords from outside were duly seated in their respective places. Among the kings who were invited were Daśaratha's dearest friends like King Janaka of Mithila, king Romapāda of Aṅga, and the kings of Magadha, Sindhu, Sauvira and Saurāṣṭra. Besides, ■ million citizens from all over the kingdom came to witness the sacrificial rites.

Then his minister Sumantra told Daśaratha: "Sage Ṛṣyaśṛṅga is a man who has a gift for impeccable speech. Every word that ■■■■ out of his lips automatically becomes ■ deed. Once upon a time in the land of Aṅga there ■■■■ drought for twelve years. The people ■■■■ put to all kinds of trouble, because of it. King Romapāda invited sage Ṛṣyaśṛṅga. The sage, by virtue of his penance, caused plentiful rain to fall. The waters made the whole land of Aṅga fertile and prosperous. As ■ token of his gratitude, king Romapāda gave his foster daughter in marriage to sage Ṛṣyaśṛṅga. Since then there was no famine in the kingdom of Aṅga. Therefore I request you to invite that gifted sage to preside over this occasion. If this sacrifice is fulfilled under his guidance, you are sure to beget male offspring." King Daśaratha was pleased with these words, and he himself went to the kingdom of Aṅga to invite sage Ṛṣyaśṛṅga, to come and supervise the Aśvamedha and Putrakāma sacrifices. The whole town of Ayodhyā was busily engaged in the arrangements for the millions of visitors who came to see the sacrificial rites.

Everywhere the people were being fed with sumptuous dinners. The poor brahmins and the beggars and other needy people were granted ample ■■■■ for their lifelong livelihood. All

these beneficiaries thanked the king and prayed to God that he be blessed with all good things and with children.

AŚVAMEDHA

On an auspicious day, the sacrifice of Aśvamedha was begun. Sage Rṣyaśṛṅga presided over the ceremony. Sage Vasiṣṭha and other learned scholars and saints sat beside him. King Daśaratha, in the company of fellow rulers like Romapāda, was seated in the front row. In the second row sat his ministers and the feudal lords. On the opposite side the general public took their seats in respectful calm. Scented water was sprinkled on the assembled people, and they were offered, as tokens of welcome, sweet-smelling flowers and garlands and sandalwood paste. The whole gathering resembled the court of Indra, the King of Heaven.

The upper portion of the sacrificial altar was decorated with green leaves. On the altar were placed silver plates containing several multi-coloured flowers. Rṣyaśṛṅga offered many sweet fruits, gold-hued paddy, cow-ghee and curd, delicious honey, and the like, for the pleasure of the gods: they were all consumed by the sacrificial fire, the material agency of the divine receptive power embodied in the God of Light and Fire, Agni. The Sītāphala (a kind of sweet fruit) which Daśaratha passed on to Rṣyaśṛṅga was consigned to the sacred flames. When a minister was asked by a feudal lord what that fruit was, the former replied that it was the 'fruit of curse' (śāpaphala) which on a former occasion the old sage offered to Daśaratha when the king accidentally killed the sage's only son.

As that 'fruit of curse' was swallowed by the God of Fire, the Aśvamedha sacrifice--- the extinguisher of all sins and the harbinger of all joys--- came to an end. The king gave away suitable presents to the four chief priests. Everyone who witnessed it was gratified, because the Aśvamedha was successfully performed.

Then Daśaratha respectfully requested Rṣyaśṛṅga to perform the other rite--- Putrakāma. The sage acceded to the request and concentrating all his powers in the performance he set about his

task in right earnest. As the sage was reciting the hymns in an inspiringly high tone, all the assembly was thrilled.

Suddenly from inside the sacrificial fire emerged dazzling and overleaping flames. The gathering could not make out why it so happened. They were all staring at the altar with surprise and awe written on their features. From among the upsurging flames a noble divine figure, wearing golden clothes and adorned with a diamond coronet on his head, presented himself. In his hands was a golden bowl with a silver lid.

That noble figure told Daśaratha: "Your Majesty, this Putrakāma rite, performed under the aegis of R̥ṣyaśṛṅga, has come to a successful conclusion. In this golden bowl is a charmed porridge prepared by Lord Viṣṇu Himself. Please divide this porridge among your three wives. By drinking this porridge they will be able to bear you four heroic sons."

Rising from his seat, Daśaratha gratefully accepted the bowl and saluted the noble personage with due respect. Then the figure vanished. The assembly highly praised R̥ṣyaśṛṅga for the powers of his penance and for the efficacy of his guidance. The much-delighted king bowed to the feet of the sage and sought his blessings. The sage granted the king's wish.

All the guests were duly honoured. The neighbouring rulers and the feudal lords took their leave of Daśaratha, and thanking him for his hospitality, returned home.

All this was indeed one of the most memorable incidents in the life of Daśaratha, one of the greatest of the Ikṣvāku lineage of kings.

THE FRUITS OF THE PORRIDGE

Following R̥ṣyaśṛṅga's instructions, Daśaratha divided the porridge among his three wives. All three were overjoyed at the thought that soon their lives would be sanctified and fructified.

The three queens in due course of time were delivered of male children. Kausalyā gave birth to one; Sumitrā to two; and Kaikeyī to one. On hearing the news, Daśaratha was enraptured.

He proceeded towards the abodes of his consorts to inquire after their well-being. The four children were ■ joyous sight. They were softly crying as befitting the newborn. Those tender cries were music to the king's ears.

The news spread all over the city of Ayodhyā. The people came out into the streets and were dancing with supreme joy. They went up to the palace in their thousands to compliment the king. On seeing them, the king was ecstatically moved to tears. He gave them rich gifts, especially to the deserving poor and the needy scholars. Sweets were distributed among them. They prayed to God to bless the newborn with long life and to grant constant joy to the blessed parents, and went their several ways.

On the thirteenth day after their birth, arrangements were made for the christening ceremony of the children. Vasiṣṭha and other priests, the king, the three queens, the four children, the ministers and the entourage of the whole palace gathered at the function. Sage Vasiṣṭha, the chief priest, performed the ceremony in full conformity with the scriptural edicts.

Kausalyā's son was christened Śrī Rāma; Kaikeyī's was named Bharata; Sumitra's two sons were called Lakṣmaṇa and Śatrughna. Then Vasiṣṭha and other sages blessed the royal offspring that they might enjoy longevity and prosperity all through their lives. Daśaratha rewarded them suitably. The palace retinue was presented with several useful gifts. The nurses put the children to bed in golden hammocks. All the assembled suvāsinīs (women whose husbands are alive) dropped akṣatas (sacred rice) and flowers, as a mark of good wishes, on the children. The boys, seeing the good ladies, smiled at them with glee. The whole assembly was much gladdened at the sight of those beautiful smiles. At last they all happily returned home, accepting the various new clothes, fruits and flowers they were offered by the roylaty. The gods in the heavens showered flowers of blessing on the tiny tots.

Thus several years passed by in peace. The four children were growing up into splendid-looking boys. They were all extremely good-looking and equally good-natured. Being geniuses by birth, they acquired all the arts and crafts of war and peace with utmost

ease. Archery and horse-riding were as quickly learnt as the secrets of literature and statecraft. Among the brothers, mutual regard, sense of unity and fraternal love, instinctively and irrevocably, prevailed. Self-discipline was second nature to them. They thus were a pride and joy to their parents and to the people at large.

One day Daśaratha called forth his chief priest Vasiṣṭha and his chief minister Sumantra, along with other priests and ministers, and told them: "Gentlemen, my sons have come of age. It is the tradition of our Solar race to marry women of the Lunar clan. So you must all be on the lookout for suitable brides for these boys. I specially request you, Sage Vasiṣṭha, to undertake this responsibility, for there is nothing you cannot do with the power of your penance."

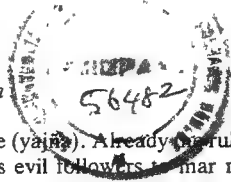
Vasiṣṭha accepted the responsibility, and the other priests and ministers promised to place their services at his disposal.

VIŚVĀMITRA'S ARRIVAL

At that juncture, the doorman announced the arrival of Sage Viśvāmitra. King Daśaratha rose from his seat, went up to the sage, respectfully welcomed him to the court, and requested him to be seated in a dignified position. Then he humbly told Viśvāmitra "Revered sage, your visit is a matter of gratification for us. By your coming you have made this day sacred to all of us. I beg of you to bless my sons. If you have come here on a special mission, kindly let me know at once. Whatever be its nature, I promise to meet your demand."

Viśvāmitra was much pleased. Knowing very well that the kings of Ikṣvāku lineage were always as good as their word, he was sure that Daśaratha would keep his promise, and thereby enable him to perform his penance and sacrificial rites without any disturbance from the Rākshasas (demoniac men).

The sage said: "Oh mighty king, May your offspring for ever enjoy peace, prosperity and longevity! May the people serve them with constant obedience and love! Your Gracious Majesty, permit me to submit to you that I have come here with a particular aim. I



am performing ■ great religious sacrifice (yajña). Already the ruler of Laṅkā, Rāvana, has sent two of his evil followers to mar my yajña. They are Mārīca and Subāhu. Whenever I start offering my sacrificial prayers or arrange the ritual bowls on the altar, these two demons throw on the sacred material such horrid things as human skulls, animal carcasses and blood. Although I have the power to quell their evil deeds, I had to restrain myself because, if I let loose my revengeful passions, the result would be not only the unsettling of my concentration and peace of mind but also the undoing of all that I hope to achieve through the holy act of yajña. In killing my enemies, Rāma alone can help me. As does his Guru, Vasiṣṭha, I too know all about Rāma's valour and strength.

*"Aham vedmi mahātmānam rāmam satyaparākramam
Vasiṣṭho'pi mahātejā ye ce'me tapasi sthitāh.*

"So please send Rāma along with me. As soon ■ he fulfils his task of enabling me to complete my yajña, without let or hindrance, I myself will escort him back here safely. You need have no fear on his account, for Rāma is invincible by birth."

Viśvāmitra's words struck Daśaratha's heart like an arrow. He thought: "Rāma is still a youngster. Can I survive, even for ■ second, without seeing him? Oh, how strange is Viśvāmitra's wish! If I do not honour it, I may be liable to his curse (śāpa). Therefore ■ must somehow placate the sage." Then he fell at the sage's feet and tearfully supplicated: "Revered Sir, Have you spoken thus to test my good faith? You know that Rāma has not yet completed his sixteenth year.

*"Ūna ṣoḍaśa varṣo me rāmo rājīvalocanaḥ,
Na yuddhayogyatām asya paśyāmi sāha rākṣasaiḥ.*

"What sort of prowess has he to kill the mighty demons? So please let me follow you to protect your yajña."

Hearing those words, Viśvāmitra was enraged. His eyes became bloodshot. He never thought that Daśaratha would go back on his word. He wondered: "Was the king talking so, merely out of his extreme affection for his son, or was he doing so because he lacked enough faith in my power of penance? Or could it be that the king was not quite alive to Rāma's inborn might and

power which are for ever prepared to punish the wicked and protect the virtuous? How could Daśaratha, whose sense of proportion was clouded by the native human ignorance caused by *māyā*, visualise Rāma's great future? Anyway if Daśaratha does not send Rāma with him he will have to bear the brunt of my anger."

However, Vasiṣṭha the far-sighted saint, saved the situation. He was quite aware of Viśvāmitra's power of penance. If Daśaratha goes against the angry sage's wishes he will have to suffer from the latter's curse. And Viśvāmitra's curse is irrevocable. So he advised: Lord, please note that Viśvāmitra is gifted with ■ invincible power of penance. It is unwise to lay yourself open to his anger, for if he curses you no power on earth can save you. Besides, have no fear on Rāma's account. He is innately able to kill the demons. So honour your word and send Rāma with the sage." The king obeyed the sage.

At that point Rāma entered the court. He was followed by Lakṣmaṇa. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are two ■ physical figures, but one as spiritual entities. They are inseparable in mind and heart. Lakṣmaṇa can never tolerate a moment away from his elder brother. They both saluted their father and awaited his command. But how can any father willingly bring himself to send, on such ■■ errand, his tender, beloved sons?

Daśaratha reluctantly said to Rāma, "Son, Sage Viśvāmitra asked me to send you to protect his *yajña* from the onslaught of the demons, because you alone can undertake the responsibility. Since the sage's wish must be honoured, I have agreed to send you with him. It is now your duty to see that the *yajña* is performed without fail. The Rākṣasas are cunning and cruel. You must be ever wary in dealing with them."

Rāma accepted the command with good cheer. He smilingly turned towards Lakṣmaṇa. How could Lakṣmaṇa leave Rāma? So the former got ready to go along with the latter. Neither Viśvāmitra nor Vasiṣṭha wanted to stop him. So Daśaratha too had to allow Lakṣmaṇa to go.

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa discarded their princely robes and put ■ the clothing befitting the children of ■ hermitage. Then they

equipped themselves with their respective weapons. Good omens were felt on all sides. The right eye (auspicious in the case of ■ man) of Daśaratha trembled; the left eye (good for a woman) of Kausalyā and Sumitrā quivered. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa bowed to Vasiṣṭha and to their parents, by way of taking their leave of them. They all kissed the royal boys on the forehead and blessed them.

Viśvāmitra was satisfied. How lucky he is! He is able to take back with him the very incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu. If the Rākṣasa clan must perish, it is only through Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa that the task can be accomplished.

Viśvāmitra took his leave of Daśaratha and Vasiṣṭha, and accompanied by the brothers, set off for his hermitage. The king, his wives and the palace retinue found themselves unable to bear the anguish of being parted from Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Oh, how odd is this worldly bondage to physical bonds! Unless one can realize its ephemeral nature, it is impossible to be rid of the illusive distress that one brings on oneself by undue attachment to mundane relationships.

As Viśvāmitra was swiftly walking away with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa behind him, all these worldly people were staring at them with tear-filled eyes till they were out of sight.

INSTRUCTION

Having escorted Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa on to the banks of river Sarayū, Viśvāmitra told them: "Dear Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, please take a dip in this holy river. When you come back I shall initiate you in the crafts of Bala (might) and Atibala (extreme might). Armed with these secret charms, you will never again feel fatigue or suffer disease, and will be able to conquer your enemies without difficulty."

Accordingly, the boys went to the river. On seeing them, the river began to swell. Ah, that is how it reveals its high regard for the Ikṣvāku lineage! Saluting the river and bathing in it, the princes came back to Viśvāmitra. The sage initiated them in 'Bala' and 'Atibala' mantras. After mastering the charmed hymns, Rāma

and Lakṣmaṇa found themselves imbued with a supernatural vigour. Their bodies were thrilled. Tears of rapture fell from their eyes. Their faces shone with ■ heavenly light. The sage was self-forgetfully delighted at their sight.

Then the three proceeded on their journey. As they went some distance, the sun set. They rested for the night on ■ green meadow with tender leaves for their bed. The moon shed cool light upon them. Vāyu (the God of Air) fanned them with sweet-smelling breezes from the western mountains.

Early next morning Viśvāmitra woke up Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. They renewed their journey, and by evening reached the kingdom of Aṅga. They stopped at the spot where the rivers Gaṅgā and Sarayū join. They stayed the night there, and the next morning crossed the confluence and entered a wild forest.

In that jungle lives the she-demon Tāṭakā, the mother of Māriṇa. She is as strong as a thousand elephants. After she began inhabiting the forest, what was formerly an abode of peace turned into ■ veritable hell.

END OF TĀṬAKĀ

The sage asked the princes to get ready to kill this vicious Tāṭakā. As Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa began aiming their arrow, its contact on the bow-string produced such sound as shook the very nerves of the creatures living on its hearing. The sound also fell on the ear of the she-demon. She was roused to uncontrollable wrath, and, fiercely shouting and bellowing, she ran upto where Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa took their stance.

As a result of her movement the whole sky was enveloped in ■ thick dust. Hiding herself in the dust-cloud, Tāṭakā started hurling heavy stones on the princes. Rāma's arrows not only broke them into pieces but also cut off the ■■■■ of the demon. Consequently the wild woman got even more wild and stretching out her tongue frighteningly, fell upon the princes with added force. In the fight Lakṣmaṇa cut off her ears and nose. When she still was not subdued, Rāma hit her chest with ■■■ arrow. She then fell down and life left her wretched frame.

Viśvāmitra embraced the boys and congratulated them on their first great victory. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were much gratified.

They all spent the night in the same forest. Early next morning Viśvāmitra woke up Rāma, with these words:

*“Kausalyāsuprajā rāma, pūrvā sandhyā pravartate,
Uttiṣṭha naraśārdūla, kartavyam daivamāhnikam.*

“Rāma, finish your morning prayers. I am pleased with your courage and self-confidence. I shall give you some more mighty weapons. Armed with them, you will be completely unconquerable.”

Rāma bowed to his Guru's feet. Turning eastwards, the sage fell into meditation. The whole neighbourhood was uncannily quiet. All of a sudden, at the silent call of the sage, marvellous weapons in the shape of divine figures, came out of the firmament. With folded hands the personified weapons bowed to Rāma and said:

*“Ūcuśca muditāḥ sarve rāmam prāñjalayastadā,
Ime sma paramodārāḥ kiṅkarāḥ tava rāghava.*

“Lord Rāma, We are ready to do your command, for we became your property now.”

Rāma replied: “Now go back to your respective abodes. I shall call for your services as and when the need arises.” Then all the personified weapons disappeared.

Later Viśvāmitra, along with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, entered a region full of natural beauty and splendour. On arriving there, Rāma asked the sage: Revered Sir, this area is so lovely to look at. Who lives here? What is the special importance of this place?”

Viśvāmitra replied: “Rāma, this is known as Siddhāśrama. Once sage Kaśyapa, in the company of his wife Aditi, prayed to Lord Viṣṇu, in deep meditation and strict penance. Pleased with their penance, the Lord took birth as their son in the form of Vāmana (a man of short stature). It was the same Vāmana who crushed Emperor Bali into the Pātāla (the nether world). It was

also here that I started my Yajña. Mārīcha and Subāhu came here to mar the performance of the Yajña. That is why I brought you here. You have to kill them and see that my sacrifice is completed without their intrusion." The princes agreed to the request.

They all spent the night there, and waking up early next day, were all set to quell the attack of the Rākshasas. The sage was seated on deer-skin and began his penance. Some other sages sat around him. They told Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, "Viśvāmitra will meditate thus in silence for six consecutive days and nights. All the time you must watch the place with unrelenting vigilance. You only are capable of saving us from outside disturbances." Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were awaiting the arrival of Mārīcha and Subāhu.

Thus five days passed by. On the sixth day, suddenly, flames rose up from the sacrificial altar. Accompanied by fierce cries, blood started falling down from the skies. Rāma looked up. Along with an army, Mārīcha and Subāhu were to be seen above.

MĀRĪCHA AND SUBĀHU

The sight angered Rāma, and he aimed the redoubtable Mānavāstra at Mārīcha. That divine weapon struck the demon, who was hurled by its force twelve hundred miles away into the sea. Rāma killed Subāhu with Āgneyāstra. The rest of the Rakṣasas army was driven away with Vāyavyāstra.

Viśvāmitra and his fellow sages were gratified and thanked the princes for putting ■■ end to the Rākshasa menace.

As they were all tired after the performance of the Yajña, during which they had to subsist on a bare diet of roots and fruits they then rested themselves for the night on beds made up of flowers and leaves. The moon showered gentle light on them.

Walking up early morning, the other sages told Viśvāmitra: "Revered Sir, we heard that King Janaka is performing a great Yajña. Till now we did not have the pleasure of seeing the splendour of the city of Mithilā with our own eyes. It is said that there is ■ bow of Lord Śiva which cannot be wielded either by the titans or the demons; many heroes failed even to lift it. We have an

idea that Rāma can handle it and break it like a twig. This rare opportunity must not be missed. King Janaka is both ■ saint and an emperor of matchless integrity. He knows perfectly well all the rules of hospitality. We will be very diligently and civilly cared for there. So let us at once start for Mithilā.”

Hearing this, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were supremely gladdened. As for Viśvāmitra, it had all along been his own wish. He never for a moment doubted Rāma's ability to break Śiva's bow. Therefore he readily agreed to the expedition to the city of Mithilā.

KALYĀṆA YĀTRA ■

The bullock-carts of the hermitage rolled along lovely roads, cutting through lush meadows and fertile fields. The bells tied around the necks of the sturdy bulls were tinkling musically; the drivers were singing folk songs, as though to the beat of the tinkling bells. The sages were all the time recounting the stories about the splendour of Mithilā city.

It was all a new experience to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, for they were hitherto used to travelling by golden chariots drawn by white steeds. They were enjoying it all.

Resting for ■ while on the way, they approached river Śoṇā by nightfall. Stopping there for the night, they resumed their journey next morning and reached the banks of Gaṅgā river at night. Resting there overnight, the next day they arrived in the city of Viśālā. From there, early ■ the fourth day, they reached their destination.

Viśvāmitra told his fellow sages: “There you see the great city of Mithilā with its sky-kissing palaces built of white marble. Look at the sparkling gold vessels capping their towers! Do you notice the beautifully fluttering flags of victory adorning those fortresses? Yes, here is the scintillating golden capital city, Mithilā, the abode of the renowned sage-king Janaka. Really, the grandeur of this city excels even Indra's heavenly town of Amarāvati. We have

*A journey which is ■ result in a wedding.

now approached the precincts of the town. Please proceed slowly. I shall follow you presently, along with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa."

Accordingly, the other sages went ahead.

After a while, Viśvāmitra and the princes went back to the banks of river Śoṇā. Having bathed there, and completing their ablutions, they rested for some time.

Later Rāma asked the sage: "Esteemed sage, this place is quite delightful. To which kingdom does this area belong? Kindly enlighten me on the history of this sacred river."

Viśvāmitra was pleased with Rāma's question and replied: "Rāma! King Vasu rules over this land, with the city of Girivraja as its capital. This blessed river is also called Sumāgadhī. So this kingdom also gets another name: Magadha. Flowing from east to the west, this river makes fertile all the adjoining land. There is ■ great legend associated with this divine stream.

"Brahmā's adopted child Kuśa has a son named Kuśanābha. The latter has a hundred daughters, whom he married to Brahmadatta. As the girls left for their new home, Kuśanābha found his solitary lot unbearable. Reminding himself of the ancient edict "Aputrasya gatirnā'sti" (he who has no son has no salvation) he set about the performance of the putrakāma sacrifice. Then his father, coming down from Brahmāloka, presented himself before him, and blessed him: 'Son, a son will be born to you who will be your equal in power and energy. You will christen him 'Gādhi', and he will eventually make your fame spread all over the world by being your worthy offspring.'

"In due course Gādhi was born. He was my father; since he was born in the Kuśa clan he was also known as Kauśika. Besides myself, he also had ■ daughter, my sister Satyavati, who was given in marriage to Rchika. She was such a pious lady that she could reach heaven retaining her terrestrial body. But she was not content with that unique achievement. She was determined to sanctify the lives of the fallen creatures on the earth, and with that aim took rebirth in the form of ■ river in the Himālayan region. Inspired by my love for my sister, I once performed penance near that river. After the successful completion of that penance, I came

down to this place, which is now known as Siddhāśrama, for I became a Siddha (one who attained his life's greatest aim--- Salvation), thanks to your help."

They rested there for the night. The next morning they bathed in the Śoṇa river, and crossing it later, reached the banks of Gaṅga in the afternoon. As soon as the princes and the sages sighted that holy river, they saluted it on bended knees. Then the sages performed a Homa (a kind of self-purifying rite), and sitting in the cool shade of giant trees, shared among themselves the nectar-like sacrificial oblation (havis). At that point, Rāma asked Viśvāmitra "Sir, what is the reason behind this river's dividing herself into three, and flowing in the three worlds (earth, sky and the space between)?."

The question pleased not only Viśvāmitra but also the other sages. Viśvāmitra answered it thus.

BIRTH OF A SON

"Rāma, the greatest depository of silver, gold, diamond and other precious metals is the king of mountains, Himavān (Himālaya). His wife is Manoramā, the daughter of the king of Mount Meru. The blessed Himavān couple had two daughters--- the elder Gaṅgā, the other, Umā, both of whom are sacred beings worshipped all over the universe.

"The gods beseeched Himavān to allow Gaṅgā to sanctify the three worlds by flowing through them. He acceded to their request.

"The other daughter Umā prayed to Lord Śiva in order to become his spouse. The great god was pleased with her penance, and on her request Himavān offered her in marriage to Śiva. The divine couple thereafter became the most adored in all the universe, through their loving protection of all living creatures."

Rāma's curiosity was further aroused, and not quite satisfied with the cursory account of Gaṅgā's history, asked the sage to narrate it in greater detail.

Viśvāmitra gladly consented and said: "Rāma, your wish is quite right. Once Umā and Śiva were engaged in the act of love. For a long time neither Śiva's ejaculation nor Umā's orgasm was effected. Both of them were longing for the birth of a son. At last Śiva's semen started coming out, and the time for Umā's conception approached. The power and strength of the offspring of Śiva's potency would be unrivalled, and such a person cannot be accommodated in all the three worlds. Therefore the gods begged Śiva to contain within himself his semen. Then, complying Śiva told them that while he understood the cause of their anxiety, he could not see how he could check the overflow and how anyone could bear it once it fell out.

"Realizing that only Mother Earth (Bhūdevī) is capable of receiving the semen, they requested the Lord to let it down upon her. Śiva did accordingly. Bhūdevī accepted it with pleasure. The wish of the gods was fulfilled.

"But then, Umā was terribly angered. Her desire was not satisfied. The gods came in the way of her getting children, and instead, sought the help of Bhūdevī. Umā felt that she was insulted by her lord. Her eyes became bloodshot, and she breathed fire. Both Bhūdevī and the gods were frightened. As for Śiva, he realized too late that in order to please the gods he neglected his own beloved wife. Perhaps it is because of this altruistic trait of his that people praise him as "Bola (bholā) Śaṅkar" (one who is good or generous to a fault). Indeed such is his self-forgetful love of his devotees.

"The angry Umā cursed: 'You demigods, what kind of justice is yours? Your hearts are full of evil and envy. Didn't you notice how much I longed for progeny? You always think of your own good. Would you sacrifice my welfare to your self-interest? Since you caused me childlessness, so too may your wives become barren!

"Still her anger was not cooled. She cursed Bhūdevī also: 'You wretch, don't you get too excited over your good luck! May you also become (partly) barren with some of your regions useless for cultivation or inhabitation!'

“Still wild with her disappointment, she turned her wrath on her lord also: ‘Sir, is it fair on your part to insult your own lifemate thus? What harm did I do you to deserve this? Even if I were, unknown to myself, guilty of some misdemeanour, would you make me a thing of shame, a butt of ridicule to all my sex? What made you stoop to the folly of lending yourself to the blame of discourtesy to your own wife? I have no more interest in this life of shame and disappointment. Tell me, is there no way for me out of this distress?’”

“Śiva was deeply touched. But still, what could he do? He gave his word to the demigods. He already released his semen on to the earth. He knew it was all due to his overbearing love for his devotees. However, could he have done it all in such self-forgetfulness? Would the Omniscient God that He is do anything in ignorant unawareness? All this really is Śivalīlā (the sport of Śiva).

“When Śiva’s semen fell on earth, Bhūdevī was put to all kinds of trouble, because she too could not tolerate it all. Then the demigods requested the God of Fire (Agni) to swallow the semen with the help of the God of Air. Agni did the needful. The semen that flowed out ■ a result of that action turned into ■ white mountain. There it was that Kārtikeya took birth. The demigods bent their heads in shame. Later both Umā and Śiva started upon ■ long penance in the northern part of Himālayas.

“This, then, was the story of Umā. Now, Rāma, I shall also tell you the stories of Gaṅgā and Kārtikeya.”

STORY OF GAṅGĀ

“As Umā and Śiva went up to the Himālayas, the (demi)gods, with their leader, Indra, approached Brahmā and sought the latter’s counsel ■ to their next step.

Brahmā told them: ‘Since Umā’s curse is irrevocable, you may no longer have any children. There is only one solution to your problem, and that is through the help of Gaṅgā. The great river, by virtue of her heavenly heritage, has made you pious and has also the power to come to your rescue. If she cohabits with

Lord Agni, she will give birth to a great commander named Arindama. This way you will also meet no objection from Umā; on the contrary, Umā will be satisfied with the arrangement.'

"The consoled demigods went to meet Lord Agni and prayed to him: 'God Agni, now is the time for you to come to our aid. Kindly agree to impregnate Gaṅgā Devī.

"Agni agreed. Gaṅgā was already prepared. At the call of Agni she went to him in the shape of a lovely lady. Agni entered into her and diverted Śiva's semen which he till then was harbouring within him. Gaṅgā was so pleased that she could not easily bring herself to let him go. Oh, if this transient joy of passion's fruit should so obsess the gods themselves, what wonder is there that it should delude us humans even more! That is why the wise men always pursue the path of renunciation and keep away from lustful pursuits.

"Gaṅgā was with the child. She found it hard to bear with Agni's potency. As she begged him to release her from her painful predicament, he advised her to release it at the foot of the Himālayas. She did so, and her pain was gone. It was for the benefit of humanity that both Agni and Gaṅgā put themselves to so much trouble. It is the cross that all selfless persons have to bear in this world.

"From where the semen flowed, emerged gold and silver; copper and iron; tin and lead. In fact the entire tract became a veritable mine of all precious metals. Even the bushes and the bracken, the saplings and the flora there, turned into gold.

"Last of all, the life-giving cells gave birth to ■ male child. In order to suckle him the demigods appointed half-a-dozen wet nurses. The demigods accepted the plea of the nurses that the latter may regard the child as their own offspring. Since he was fed and nourished by six Kṛttikās, the boy came to be known as Kārttikeya. It was he that later became the most - worshipped and renowned deity, also called Ṣaṇmukha, because of the fact that he had six faces and simultaneously sucked milk (his lips in) from each of them. Since he was the fruit of the 'abortion' of Gaṅgā he was also known ■ Skanda. Now then, I told you the story of the heavenly Gaṅga and of the birth of her son Kumāra sambhava)"

Both the princes and the sages heard this narrative with great interest and enthusiasm.

Again Viśvāmitra told Rāma the following story.

"The kingdom of Ayodhyā was once ruled by the emperor Sagara. That powerful, dutiful king had two wives---Keśinī, the daughter of Vidarbha king; Sumatī, the daughter of Kaśyapa. But neither of them could bring forth a child for him. Therefore the sad king, accompanied by his two wives, went to that part of the Himālayas where sage Bhṛgu lives, and started doing penance. After many years of meditation, the king and his wives could convince sage Bhṛgu to present himself before them. They bowed to the sage.

"The sage told the king: 'Your prayers are answered. You shall have children and thereby gain eternal fame. One of your wives will give birth to a son who will be an ornament to your race; the other wife will have sixty thousand children. The choice between these two rests on the shoulders of your spouses.

"Keśinī chose the single would-be famous son; Sumatī, the sixty thousand sons. The sage said 'so be it', and they went their several ways.

"After some time a son named Asamañja was born to Keśinī. To Sumatī was born an embryo in the shape of bottlegourd. From out of it came sixty thousand children. The parents were mightily pleased with their offspring. The children were put in a pot and brought up with much care. They grew up into handsome boys.

"Now, the son of Keśinī, Asamañja, took to evil ways. It was his idea of sport to entice the infants of the city of Ayodhyā and throw them into river Sarayū, and to laugh at the sight of those drowning children. Thus he became very unpopular with the people. As a result of which, Emperor Sagara, setting aside his paternal affection, drove away the erring son into the jungle.

"However, a strong and pious son, Amśuman, was born to Asamañja. He earned the love and affection of the populace. Emperor Sagara looked upon this good grandson as his *alter ego*. It was at this juncture that the emperor decided on performing Aśvamedha, and called forth the priests for the purpose."

Rāma was pleased with this part of the narration, and, with greater curiosity, asked the sage how Sagara performed the "horse-sacrifice."

Viśvāmitra proceeded: "Rāma, realizing that the region between the two mountains of Himālaya and Vindhya is the most hallowed, Sagara performed the sacred rite there. They let loose the sacrificial horse. Aṁśuman followed it as its guard.

THE STORY OF THE YAJÑĀŚVA (Sacrificial horse)

"Dear prince, none could stop the progress of the horse. It came back after a successful trip to all the four corners of the country. On its return, the time for the actual performance of the sacrifice dawned. But Indra, the jealous lord of Heaven (who has reason to fear every successful sacrifice, because the performer would be a potential usurper of his throne), came down in the guise of a Rākṣasa and stole the horse secretly. None foresaw this eventuality.

"The priests told the emperor: 'Your Majesty, the Yajñāśva is not to be seen anywhere. We have to trace it rightaway. Otherwise our oblations will become impure. No attempt of such a sacred rite must be left incomplete, for then the sin one commits will be worse than that resulting from non-performance of such good deeds.'

"Accepting the words of the priests as gospel truth, the emperor commissioned his sixty thousand sons thus: 'Brave knights, the pious priests have been performing the Yajña. Someone has stolen the sacrificial horse, which should be present here for the successful completion of the Yajña. Please look for the horse here on earth, and if you can't find it above the surface, you must dig the earth and get down into the nether world (pātāla). The priests and I will remain bound by our sacred vow till you return with the horse. I wish you godspeed.'

"The horse could not be found anywhere on the surface of the earth. So the worried Sagara children began digging the earth with forceful strokes.

"Rāma, as the sons of Sagara were breaking the ground, fierce noises were heard. The earth itself trembled all over. All

creatures of the earth were frightened for their lives. Then the demi-gods approached Brahmā and appealed to him: 'Lord, we can't stand the sight of these groaning people and of the quaking Mother Earth. The Sagara boys are mercilessly persecuting everyone in their search for the sacrificial horse. Please suggest a way out of this trouble.'

"Brahmā replied: 'Mother Earth (Bhūdevī) is the property of Lord Viṣṇu. That mighty God is the protector and dispenser of justice. He will not spare these erring Sagara princes. Their own anger will be their doom and they are going to perish before long. So rest assured that Viṣṇu will take care of Mother Earth and her inhabitants.'

"The time for the downfall of the Sagara children was fast approaching. They ransacked both the earth and the nether world. Failing in their search, they returned to their father. The emperor was sorely disappointed in them and admonished them to look for the horse with renewed vigour.

"Accordingly, they renewed their search. On their way they came across the elephant-god Virūpākṣa who carries Mother Earth on his shoulders and whose shaking up of himself would make the whole earth tremble. The princes were awed by the sight of Virūpākṣa and begged him for the information about the Yajñāśva. But the elephant-god didn't reply them.

"Then the Sagara princes went southwards. There they met the guardian of that side, the elephant-god Padma whom they requested in vain for information. The same fate met them when they approached Saumañjasa, the elephant-guardian of the West. Going northwards, the tired princes had a similar experience with Bhadra, the elephant-god of that region.

"At last they reached the north-east point of the earth. There they found Viṣṇu in the incarnation of Kapila and also, the sacrificial horse by his side. The boys were wild with delight. They took the sage Kapila to be the thief and began attacking him. The sage angrily cursed them and they all turned into ashes.

"When, even after a long time, the boys did not return home, emperor Sagara was worried and said to Amśuman: 'Dear boy,

you are a great hero. You **are** my last hope in getting this Yajña triumphantly concluded. So please **find** yourself and go in search of your uncles and the sacrificial horse. Fight all those who obstruct your progress, with determination and with the obedient memory of your obligation to you elders and forbears'.

"Arṇśuman appreciated the agony of his grandfather. He realized he had the dual responsibility of pacifying the emperor and of seeing the Yajña successfully completed. What greater deed **can** he perform than fulfilling this blessed duty?

"Arṇśuman went on his errand. Passing some distance he **saw** a sacred elephant, much revered by all. He went round the elephant-god in worshipful humility. The 'diggaja' was pleased with his reverence and not only blessed him but also assured him that he would soon find the 'Yajñāśva'. Thus reassured, the prince enthusiastically searched the four corners of the earth.

"Rāma! the elephants who shoulder the burden of the earth on all sides **are** all very learned. Learning from them the fate of his uncles, Arṇśuman was much saddened. As he proceeded to the northeast, he found the horse there. His hopes began shining like **a** light in darkness, and he thanked his Maker for His mercy.

"Then Arṇśuman wanted to offer prayers for his uncles. But he could not find water anywhere for the ablution. Disappointed and dejected, he looked upwards at the sky. There he **saw** the Divine bird Garuḍa who is also the uncle of the Sagara princes. Arṇśuman expressed his plight to Garuḍa.

"Garuḍa consolingly replied: 'O heroic prince, why **are** you lamenting thus? They offended sage Kapila and had to suffer for their sin. There is no use in your offering prayers for them, for your oblations cannot get them entry into Heaven. There is only one way open to you to help them. Try to get the heavenly river Gaṅgā down to this region. If that holy lady grants that her waters flow upon the ashes of your uncles, they will be saved. So, first return the horse to emperor Sagara in order that he might complete his Yajña. Then set about getting Gaṅgā down here and with those holy waters offer your ablutions on behalf of your uncles.'

"Accepting Garuḍa's good advice, Aṁśuman returned the horse to his grandfather and told him all the news. Sagara was struck with grief on hearing the sad news of the death of his sons, but pulled himself together after a while and finished the Yajña.

"Then he pondered over the means of getting down Gaṅgā to the earth. He could not manage to think of a proper plan, and, as a result, died of his grief for his sons.

"Perchance all this was an example of the saying, 'Man proposes; God disposes.' If one wants to enjoy the good fruits of good actions, one must appoint good men to help one. Sagara brought up his children in the right manner. Consequently, the princes did not desist from employing evil means to get back the sacrificial horse. That was why a sad fate befell them.

"Rāma! In the death of Sagara, the ministers entrusted the kingdom to Aṁśuman. Aṁśuman ruled over his people with justice. All the people were prosperous and thanked the benign Providence that granted them a ruler who loved them and whom they loved equally.

"Aṁśuman had a son named Dilīpa. Dilīpa is a personification of Dharma. He won the hearts of the people by his rectitude and sense of duty. So Aṁśuman had no hesitation in handing over the responsibility of kingship to his son and deciding upon performing penance to obtain the willingness of Gaṅgā to come down to earth.

"But, alas, again another king with good intentions departed this world without seeing his aim fulfilled— Aṁśuman died even before his penance bore fruit.

"Now it was Dilīpa's turn to try to get Gaṅgā down to the earth. In spite of the several sacrifices the dutiful king performed, the desired result was still not forthcoming. Much disappointed, he became a prey to an incurable disease and consequently, transferred power to his son before breathing his last.

BHAGĪRATHA'S ATTEMPT

"Dilīpa's son, Bhagīratha, is an embodiment of Truth and Duty. But even such a virtuous personage had not the good

fortune of begetting children. So he entrusted the job of ruling the people to his ministers and went to the sacred land of Gokarṇa to offer prayers to God to get all his wishes fulfilled.

“He performed his penance with strict rigour; fasted throughout, except for one meal in a whole month; placed himself amid the five fires (Pañcāgni, symbolised by Heaven, cloud, Earth, Man and Woman); and stretching his hands heavenwards in humble supplication to Brahmā stood up for a long time in deep meditation.

“Brahmā was pleased and presenting himself before Bhagīratha told him: ‘Good King, your prayers are answered. Ask me whatever you wish, and I will grant it to you.’

Bhagīratha was delighted with Brahmā’s words and replied: ‘Lord Brahmā, by merely seeing you I feel that my whole life is sanctified. However, I have a duty to perform: in order to offer ablutions on behalf of my forefathers, I have to use the waters of sacred Gaṅgā. The divine river must flow over the ashes of Sagara princes if they have to attain the bliss of heaven. Besides, I have no offspring of my own; as you know, “aputrasya gatirnā’si”, and the Ikṣvāku dynasty must not come to an end after me. So I beseech you to grant me these two favours.’

“Brahmā was deeply touched by Bhagīratha’s plea and said: ‘Dear king, your wishes are just. But the earth cannot withstand the impact of river Gaṅgā. Only Lord Śiva has the strength of bearing her weight. So you will have to seek the favour of that blessed God. Pray to Him, and He will help you in bringing Gaṅgā to the earth. As for your other wish, I grant that a son be born to you, who will bring you lasting fame and will be an ornament to your race.’

“Bhagīratha was highly satisfied with Brahmā’s words. The latter called upon Gaṅgā to accede to Bhagīratha’s request in due course, and went back to his abode in Brahmā loka.

“Standing upon a single toe, Bhagīratha started on a mighty penance to placate Lord Śiva. At last Śiva was pleased and granting the king’s wish, promised him that he would bear Gaṅgā on his head.

"Bhagīratha felt his very existence was touched with beatitude.

"As for Gaṅgā, she was willing to go down to the earth, following Brahmā's command. She knew the earth could not directly bear her impact, but she still wondered how Śiva Himself could manage to do so. So she thought up a scheme to test the Lord and get Him to take her down even into the nether world (Pātāla). Śiva surmised her plan.

"There! The blessed, noble Gaṅgā, the elder daughter of gigantic Himavān! There she is, pouring down from Heaven in order to purify the lives of all living creatures! Oh, with what tremendous force the river is dropping down in the form of crystal-white waterfalls, resembling elephant trunks, and making terrifying noise!

"Lord Śiva was fully alive to the force of Gaṅgā. He was also aware of the fact that this Gaṅgā is the sister of His consort Umā. And yet, in his concern for the devotee whose wish he promised to fulfil, he did not mind the possible anger of Umā. It was also his idea to teach Gaṅgā a lesson and see, in the process, that her pride suffered a fall along with herself.

"Gaṅga fell upon Śiva's plaits, which, as a result of the river's forceful contact, fell apart, scattered like the various dens in the Himālayas. Now how could Gaṅgā get out of those shackling plaits (jaṭājūṭa) of Śiva? She tried her best to free herself from them, but she failed. She realized that she, who tried to fool the Lord by making Him stretch his strength, was herself shamed by Him. Repenting, she begged Śiva's forgiveness. She had the great opportunity of abiding for a while in the great Lord's plaits. Consequently the holy river became even holier. At the same time she also understood that she could not fulfil Bhagīratha's wish unless she had the permission of Śiva. Śiva appreciated all this and readily forgave her.

"With all this entanglement at the high level, Bhagīratha had no alternative but to resume his prayers. The pleased Lord Śiva thereupon released (one branch of) the river into lake Bindu. Gaṅgā felt that her liberation came forth. For her part Mother

Earth bade the heavenly stream welcome. And the tenacious Bhagīratha bowed in reverence to Gaṅgā.

“Swelling up from lake Bindu, the river Gaṅgā formed itself into seven branches. Three of them, named Hrādinī, Nalinī and Pāvani, flowed eastwards. Another three--- Śītā, Sindhu, Suchakṣu--- flowed westwards. The seventh branch followed the traces of Bhagīratha’s chariot wheels. The forceful flow of the great river evoked fierce noises. Hearing them, the demigods in Heaven came down to the earth in order to enjoy that magnificent sight. Seeing those pure white waters, they were aroused to bathe in them; and afterwards drank of them. Those purifying waters released those of them who were under a curse from their long suffering. The downfallen among them were sanctified. Regaining their original splendour, and gaining a new strength, they all returned to their respective abodes.

“As Gaṅgā was falling down from heaven, the scintillating waves were caressing the clouds. The flying swans in the sky, ■ they hovered around the cascading Gaṅgā, suggested the sight of white autumn clouds.

“Down on the plains the river was taking various shapes of rivulets—little brooks and long streams, and was flowing with varying speeds in its passage through ups and downs. Because of this variation in speed and shape, the waters attained ■ uniform purity.

“Fascinated by the sight of the streaming divine river, the populace took repeated plunges in it, never satiated with the cool pleasure and the serene feeling the bath provided them. It really ■ beatific experience for them. Verily, who can have enough of the life-giving waters of the divine Gaṅgā? All the ills of the people were gone; their exuberance and enthusiasm reigned supreme.

“For her part, the Mother Earth was equally enraptured. She felt that every particle of her terrain was beaming with ■ new, everlasting life. And she was happily looking forward to the eventual fertility and prosperity that would now emerge ceaselessly.

“And Gaṅgā, following in the footsteps of Bhagīratha, was enjoying herself in self-forgetful ecstasy. Men, women and children accompanied the river-goddess and the sage-king

At one point Bhagīratha reached the hermitage of sage Jahnu. There he stopped his chariot. But Gaṅgā could not check herself and submerged Jahnu’s sacrificial altar. Angered by this, the sage drank up all her waters. The bewildered Bhagīratha prayed for the mercy of Jahnu. The latter gracefully granted Bhagīratha’s wish, and let out the Gaṅgā waters through his ear. It was because of this episode, Gaṅgā is also considered the daughter of Jahnu and has acquired her synonym, ‘Jāhnavī’ Both Bhagīratha and Gaṅgā thanked the sage and proceeded on their way.

“Bhagīratha took along the river not only into the midst of the Śāgara (ocean) but also into the nether world (pātāla). Entering the pātāla region, the river flowed over the ashes of the Sagara princes, and their rebirth in Heaven was assured by that purifying act.

“Then Brahmā presented himself before Bhagīratha and told him: ‘Great king, as long as the rivers flow into the seas, your forefathers will be enjoying the bliss of paradise. It was due to your unrelenting efforts that Gaṅgā reached the earth. That is why she will also be known as ‘Bhāgīrathī’ henceforth. Since the river is now flowing in the three areas of heaven, earth and nether world, she will also be called the ‘three-way stream’ (Tripathagā). Now offer your ablutions and oblations for your forbears. Your life-task will now be accomplished. As you brought salvation to your ancestors and will ensure the beatitude of the posterity who drink of the sacred waters, your good deed will remain for ever in the memory of humanity. Your fame will be as unending as the ceaseless flow of Gaṅgā. This river is indeed the sanctuary of all virtues and the destroyer of all evils. So you now take a dip in it yourself and you will always enjoy peace and prosperity.’

“Accordingly, Bhagīratha bathed in the river, and with renewed faith in himself and in God, he ruled over his people in such a way as to ensure them all continuous welfare. Verily, this episode deserves to be written in letters of gold in the annals of Ikshavāku dynasty.

“Now then, Rāma, I told you the story of Gaṅgā, the holy river. Now the time for our evening ablution is approaching. Let us set about performing our prayers”, concluded Viśvāmitra. ’

AHALYĀ

Proceeding on their journey back to Mithilā, the sage and the two princes arrived at Gautama Āśrama, the home of Nature’s multi-faceted loveliness. Their curiosity aroused by its splendour, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa asked Viśvāmitra to tell them all about it

The sage replied, “Dear princes, this is the hermitage of Sage Gautama. Here were living the sage and his wife Ahalyā. Once Indra, who knew, by repute about the matchless good looks of Ahalyā, entered this hermitage in the garb of Gautama, while the sage was away. Although Ahalyā recognised the king of demigods in his disguise, she, in her momentary self-delusion caused by her pride in seeing such a great person fall in love with her yielded to him.

“Really, how despicably irresistible is this physical passion which could thus lead even a sage’s wife astray! Indeed one must always be on one’s guard to resist this temptation, for it is the root of all evil.

“After enjoying herself for a while in the company of Indra, Ahalyā regained her composure and told him, ‘Sir, how dared you commit such folly? It is now time for my husband to get back home. Hurry up and go away. There is no use regretting what has already happened. However, this wretched body of mine, which brought shame on all womankind must be prepared to put up with any kind of punishment. There is no place of honour in this world for a woman who deceived her husband. Such a woman is a blot on the reputation of Mother Earth herself who gave birth to so many virtuous ladies before me. My misfortune led me into this sin. But you may still escape the curse of my husband if you rush back before he arrives.’

“Indra was confused and afraid. As he was trying to make good his escape, he fell into the sage returning home in his holy

splendour, after finishing his morning ablutions. Trembling with fear and unable to hide his shame, Indra fell at Gautama's feet. The sage clairvoyantly found out all that happened and admonished Indra thus: 'Sir, you are lost to all sense of Truth and Duty. Else why would you resort to such ill-deeds and become a slave to lustful passion? If I now let you go unharmed, you would ruin the fair name of many more virtuous women. You must pay for your sins. Now I curse you that you should lose your potency of manhood.'

"His head bent in shame, and regretting the loss of manhood Indra returned to his heavenly kingdom. Isn't it natural that such should be the fate of those who cannot rule their passions?

"Now the sage approached Ahalyā. She was determined to be consumed in the flames of her husband's wrath and stood motionless.

"Gautama addressed her thus: 'You wretch, you brought the whole class of hermitage wives into disrepute. I never imagined you would bring yourself to such ■ pass. There is no impunity for you. May you turn into dust. May you disappear from the sight of mankind. May you have nothing to eat other than the air you breathe!'

"Hearing the curse, Ahalyā grieved much: 'Should she for ever remain in such disgrace? They say that God is all-merciful and forgives the repentant sinners. Has she no way of regaining her lost virtue?' Thinking that she still has a way out, she repentantly sought her husband's mercy and forgiveness.

"The sage replied: 'My curse cannot go unfulfilled. Only the noble scion of Ikshvāku clan, Rāma, can save you. He will be passing this way after some years. As soon ■ he sees you and touches you with the dust of his feet you will regain your original form. So pray to him with unswerving devotion and dedication. When you are free from your sin and punishment, you can come back to me'. Gautama then went up to mount Kailāsa.

"Now, dear princes, let us enter this holy and historical hermitage."

As Rāma's feet touched the ground of the hermitage, the whole place was sanctified. And Ahalyā, who was till then in the shape of a heap of dust, attained back her old appearance and actually shone with greater beauty and grace, thanks to her great penance and sincere penitence. Even the gods in heaven envied her splendour in that state.

Then Ahalyā remembered the words of her lord, and prayed to Rāma, after doing him all the honours due to a god and guest.

*Aho, kṛtārthā 'smi jagannivāsa! te,
Padābja samlagna rajah kaṇādaham.
Spr̥śāmi yat padmaja śaṅkarādibhiḥ,
Vimṛgyate randhita mānasaiḥ sadā.
Yat pādapaṅkajaparāgapavitrāgātrā,
Bhāgīrathī, bhava-virinchi-mukhān punāti.
Sākṣāt sa eva mama dṛgviṣaye yadāste,
Kim varṇyate mama purākṛta bhāgadheyam.*

Oh, how noble and holy are the lotus feet of Rāma, which even the fallen creatures. His indeed is the heart of charity and good will which cannot bear for a moment the sight of a devotee's distress. Really Rāma alone deserves the title of Śaraṇāgatavatsala (he who is unfailingly fond of those that seek his refuge). And no greater vindication of this title is to be found than in the story of Ahalyā.

By virtue of his sixth sense, sage Gautama saw all that happened and coming down to his old hermitage, took back his wife. Later on they both spent the rest of their lives in constant meditation and prayer and service to God and God's children.

PROMISE OF HELP

Then sage Viśvāmitra, accompanied by Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, returned to the banks of Gaṅgā. The city of Mithilā was on the other side of the river. Now, how to cross this river? As they scanned the surroundings, their eyes fell on a lone boat at a distance. Its sole occupant, the boatman, seemed to be frightened at the sight of them, for as soon as he saw them he began rowing the boat farther away from the shore.

Then Viśvāmitra assured him: "O boatman, why is it you are running away from us? Be sure you will come to no harm because of us. We have to go to Mithilā, crossing this river. We shall reward you suitably, if you will ferry us across."

The boatman, still frightened, came up to the bank and approached Viśvāmitra. Then Rāma smilingly accosted him: "Dear boatman, why should you be afraid of us? I solemnly assure you that no danger will befall you on our account."

Hearing those words, the boatman said, "O Rāma, I know you have the power of releasing from evil all those who are under a curse. I heard all about how you saved Ahalyā. Similarly, I am afraid that, if by any mischance this boat was the cause of some unknown sin, it too would turn into a woman when you set foot on it. If I lose this boat, what means have I to take care of my wife and children?"

The sage and the princes laughed at these innocuous words. The boatman could not make out why they did so. Then Rāma assured him: "My good man, no such thing will happen to your boat. There will be no setback to your livelihood. Now take us across this Gaṅgā."

The boatman was duly reassured by these words of the divine incarnation, and seating them in his humble boat, rowed them to the other bank safely. Nothing untoward happened to the boat. Thereby the boatman's regard for Rāma increased hundredfold. He washed Rāma's feet with the holy waters of Gaṅgā and reverently saluted them.

Rāma is ■ veritable cornucopia to all his devotees. The wooden boat was transformed into ■ golden one by Rāma's touch. As the morning sun's red rays fell on the boat, it shone with a divine grace. The highly pleased boatman again and again thanked Rāma and took his leave of the party with great unwillingness.

Oh! how marvellous are the effects of even the contact of Rāma's blessed feet!

MITHILĀ

Sage Viśvāmitra left for the King's palace along with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. At that hour the bells in the towers were ringing.

The conchshells were being blown. The drums were being beaten. The townsmen were dressed up in their best clothes and came out into the streets in festive mood.

For, that was the first day of the Yajña that king Janaka started, and the well-bedecked populace was celebrating the event with due eclat. On their way to the sacrificial altar, the people came across several splendidly caparisoned elephants and horses, and equally well-decorated golden chariots. Our three visitors were making their way through these crowds with some difficulty. The other sages who already reached the destination joined them there.

Hearing the news of the arrival of sage Viśvāmitra, along with his fellow sages and Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, into his city, the king went up to receive him with due respect, accompanied by his priests, ministers, feudal lords and his whole palace entourage. The guests were gratified by this kingly welcome.

King Janaka's glance at once fell on Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Even at first sight they attracted his hearty affection. He was so favourably struck by the divine grace in their deportment.

Janaka was still not sure of the reason for the visit of the princes; nor did he know who they really were. Viśvāmitra told the king: "Your Majesty, these two princes are the children of King Daśaratha of Kosala. I invited them to protect my recent Yajña from the disturbances caused by the Rākṣasas. This is Rāma, the elder; this is Lakṣmaṇa the younger brother. They are both well-versed in archery and statecraft. They have come here to take ■ look at the bow of Lord Śiva, having fulfilled their original mission of killing Mārīca and Subāhu."

The king was greatly pleased, for here were the sons of his good friend Daśaratha. The news further increased Janaka's love for the princes, and his hope that Śiva's bow would be broken by Rāma also increased. For, the breaking of the bow is ■ pre-condition to his daughter Sītā's acceptance of a husband. Many heroes tried and failed in the attempt, and now it appeared to the king that Rāma was the right person. Both his right shoulder and right eye throbbed as ■■ indication of the coming good things.

He had now no doubt that both his condition and his wish would be fulfilled through Rāma--- the condition and the wish being complementary in the breaking of the bow and in the wedding of Sītā to the hero who did the feat.

Just when the king, Janaka, was having his own precognition of the coming good and mentally picturing the happy eventuality of the marriage of Sītā and Rāma, his daughter Sītā's left eye and Rāma's right eye also throbbed (some left part of a woman's body and some right part of a man's body said to throb as an indication of future good fortune).

King Janaka escorted the sages and the princes to his palace and guided them to their respective rooms. He arranged everything in such a way that not the least little discomfort would be felt by his guests. The city of Mithila is traditionally known for its hospitality, and in those welcoming surroundings Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, Viśvāmitra and the other sages, spent the night in great comfort.

Janaka, however, spent a somewhat restless night, because his mind was still excited over the visit of the charming princes. Of course, the king was sure of Rāma's breaking Śiva's bow; the restlessness was merely the result of eager anticipation of the forthcoming good events.

Waking up early next morning, the king went to the dwellings of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. He was still so much taken up by their enchanting mien that he wanted to be in their company as often as he could. Sage Viśvāmitra who well knew the ability of the princes to gratify the king, observed Janaka's pleasurable anxiety and was pleased with the way things were shaping in accordance with his plans in bringing Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa there.

ŚIVA'S BOW IS BROKEN

Viśvāmitra asked Janaka whether he and the princes could take a look at Śiva's bow that day. The king was expecting just this question, and now delighted with it, answered: "Revered sage, I shall only be too pleased to take you to the bow. But first hear the story surrounding it.

“Once this bow was in the possession of Lord Śiva. It served the God as a source of constant threat to the other gods in Heaven. But when these minor gods prayed to Śiva in unswerving devotion, the Lord agreed to give the bow away to them. Later the gods handed it for safekeeping to our ancestor Devarāta. Since then, this bow has been our family heirloom. One day when I, was ploughing the land where the sacrificial rite was to be performed, I found ■ sweet looking baby in the ploughshare. Since I had no children of my own, I took the child in my care and looked after her with unceasing love and affection. Sītā (*one born in the ploughshare*) is that very child. I swore to myself that I would offer her hand in marriage to only such a hero as could break this bow and thereby prove his worth and might.

“Many kings and princes learnt about my condition, and came here to try their luck, but they all failed. Disappointed in their aim to marry the most beautiful woman on earth, they waged ■ war against me. By the grace of God I defeated them all. I now gladly tell you that if Rāma breaks this bow, he will have Sītā for his wife.”

Viśvāmitra agreed to King Janaka's condition. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were awaiting the moment they could see the bow.

The news of all this spread over the city of Mithilā, and the people were wild with excitement at the thought of seeing the great feat performed by the great prince Rāma.

Verily on that day was to be inaugurated the Golden Age in the history of Mithilā. The whole populace thronged around the palace area where the bow of Lord Śiva was placed--- to be at last surely broken by that indomitable Rāma.

Sītā heard about the arrival of the princes from Ayodhyā and was herself curious to see them. As she was strolling on the terrace of the palace in the company of her maids, one of the girls happened to look below. The maid then saw Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa pacing the meadow near the court. She whispered the news to Sītā. Like the ■ waves swelling sky-high at the sight of the full moon, the predestined and latent love of Sītā for Rāma at once began ■ rise to the surface. She rushed up to the parapet wall to take a look

at Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. At that moment, her maid pointed out the princes to Sītā: "Princess, there you see the charming princes." There and then Sītā surrendered her heart and mind and soul to Rāma, the taller, darker and more handsome of the two princes. But she had her little fears. She knew that it would not be an easy task for such ■ young person to succeed where many mighty elders failed. However, she said ■ short prayer for Rāma's success, and immediately had a feeling that all would be well. Tears of joy rolled down her cheeks. She at once made up her mind that she would be the lifemate of Rāma or else remain unmarried all her life.

At that juncture king Janaka sent for her. The king asked her to be seated by his side on the throne, and ordered that the proceedings should be begun. The whole court and the courtyard nearby were jam-packed with ministers, feudal lords and visitors. On the king's orders, the bow of Śiva was brought to the courtyard: it took the hard effort of some five hundred soldiers to bring it in an iron cart drawn by eight horses.

When the bow at last reached the place, Janaka addressed Rāma thus: "Dear Prince, this is Śiva's bow. Many heroic princes could not even move it, let alone break it. This bow will test your strength. If you can lift it and handle it in an attacking position, Sītā will be yours. You see how eager the whole crowd is to see your attempt. So please begin your task."

Rāma first sought the permission of Viśvāmitra. The sage blessed him with the words, "so be it". At that point, Sītā's left eye and Rāma's right eye throbbed auspiciously. The king himself felt that Rāma would definitely succeed and prayed for that happy event. As for Sītā, she placed her faith implicitly in God. The rest of the assembly also wished that Rāma would not fail. Lakṣmaṇa was sure that Rāma would be crowned with glory. Rāma and Viśvāmitra, for their part, looked on the job as child's play.

As the anxious crowd witnessed with bated breath and staring eyes, Rāma effortlessly lifted up the Śiva bow and, in the process of, it broke into two. The resultant noise struck the spectators with its awesome ferocity and they fell back unconscious for a while.

The highly pleased king got down from the throne, and, as tears of joy rolled down his cheeks, embraced Rāma and told him:

“Rāma, how superbly valiant you are! Thrice-blessed is your father Daśaratha. Equally fortunate are we—Sītā and I. You proved yourself to be an unrivalled hero by breaking this invincible bow. Once when Sītā was playing with ■ flower-ball, it fell inside the box in which this bow was kept. To take out the ball, Sītā lifted this bow with her left hand. Only those who are divinely gifted have the power of moving this bow so easily, and so I made ■ vow that she should be married to only such an equally gifted person, blessed with the power to lift the bow ■ lightly ■ she did. Heroism would be the sole criterion for gaining her hand, I told myself. Here now is my beloved daughter, Sītā, the fruit of my penance, the sanctifier of my life, the gift of gods to me. I ■■■ now ready to give her hand in marriage to you.”

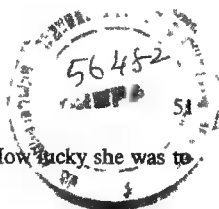
Sītā's eyes were sparkling like bright stars. At the same time she was blushing crimson. As she rapturously stole a glance at Rāma, the latter happened to look at her at that very moment. Their eyes met and their hearts were filled with ineffable love for each other. Their minds were mutually united; their souls were no longer two but one.

Rāma answered Janaka: “Lord, it was the blessing of my elders that enabled me to break Śiva's bow. I am really blessed in having fulfilled your wish. It was long time since we left our kingdom. Our parents would be anxiously awaiting our return. So, first kindly arrange to convey all this news to them.”

Janaka said he would do accordingly and then left for his abode. The happy sage, Viśvāmitra, blessed Rāma. The sages sang Rāma's praises. Lakṣmaṇa's love and regard for his elder brother increased ■ hundred fold. Rāma's heart was completely won over by Sītā.

As soon as Sītā entered her residence, her friends gathered round her and congratulated her: “Sītā, how lucky you are in having Rāma for your husband! All arrangements are being made for the wedding. King Daśaratha is a great friend of your father. So he will readily agree to this alliance. How benign is the Providence that brought Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to this court!”

Sītā's happiness was indescribable. Her vow was soon going to be vindicated. Her father's anxiety has vanished. Oh, how



blessedly mysterious are the ways of God! How lucky she was to find such a husband ■ Rāma!

King Daśaratha was pleasantly surprised to learn from Janaka's messengers all about the mighty deeds that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa performed. He was already acquainted with Janaka and had a high regard for him. Therefore, gladly assenting to Janaka's proposal for ■ alliance between the two illustrious families, he accepted the invitation to visit Mithila. The news of the proposed match reached the ears of the people at large also, and they were all looking forward to witnessing the great sight of the wedding of Sītā and Rāma.

The following day all the arrangements for the journey to Mithila were made at the command of Daśaratha. Many precious gifts, like diamond-studded golden ornaments, silken garments and exotic perfumes, were packed. The king invited all the men, women and children of Ayodhyā to join him in the wedding party. When this invitation was tomtommed, the populace went wild with joy and came out into the streets to tell one another about the heroic feats of their beloved princes, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. As for the three mothers, and the rest of the brothers, Bharata and Śatrughna, their impatience to see Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa was so high as to make them spend a sleepless night.

Everything and everyone were ready for the morrow's journey.

WEDDING PARTY

At the auspicious moment fixed by sage Vasiṣṭha, King Daśaratha, his court and entourage, his friends and all his relatives left for Mithila. As the journey began, conchshells and drums were sounded with tremendous flourish. The townspeople followed the wedding party in their thousands. Resting during the nights at various inns, and resuming the trek at dawn, they reached the outskirts of Mithila on the fifth day of the travel.

Learning, from the townguards, about the arrival of King Daśaratha and party, King Janaka accompanied by his queen,

went out to receive them. He asked Viśvāmitra, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa also to join him in bidding welcome to the visitors from Ayodhyā. A band of minstrels followed King Janaka and party, playing auspicious tunes of welcome. The people of Mithila also followed them with great enthusiasm.

Seeing Janaka and his people, Daśaratha rushed up to meet them with grateful joy. Janaka was speechlessly gratified. Daśaratha proceeded to greet Viśvāmitra and thanked the sage for all the good he had done to the young princes. Then he embraced and kissed his dear sons Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa.

Bharata and Śatrughna saluted Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. The people of Ayodhyā surged forward to congratulate their beloved heroic duo. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa thanked them heartily and humbly. The sight of that meeting of the two peoples of Ayodhya and Mithila was an unforgettable one.

Now able to articulate his gratification, King Janaka told King Daśaratha: "Dear friend, your arrival is ■ source of supreme joy for all of us. We are all grateful to you for agreeing to our proposal and for accepting our invitation. ■ now feel that my life's highest aim has been fulfilled. I know all this is the fruit of sage Viśvāmitra's magnanimity. I do not have to tell you how highly skilled are your sons Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa in the crafts of war and peace. Rāma bent Śiva's bow and broke it into two--- a feat which even the gods in heaven could not achieve. Consequently he qualified himself to marry Sītā, and thereby vindicated my vow. ■ am now quite ready to offer the hand of my god-given daughter to Rāma in marriage. I once again personally request you to accept my offer. I shall do everything as you wish."

Daśaratha gladly expressed his assent, and Vaśiṣṭha blessed Janaka's proposal. On hearing the mutual agreement of the kings and the blessings of the sage, the people all around sent up a thunderous cheer.

As Janaka was returning to his palace, escorting Daśaratha and his party, the womenfolk of Mithila showered flower-petals on them. The rest of the citizens stood on either side of the road and shouted cries of welcome and joy. The Ayodhyā party was

escorted to its dwelling place. All the needed arrangements were made, and servants were commissioned to look to their comforts.

Now, King Janaka had a daughter named Ūrmiḷā by his own wedded wife. His brother had two daughters named Māṇḍavi and Śrutakīrti. All the three are highly accomplished and beautiful. Janaka and Daśaratha were both agreed on the desirability of forming an alliance between Sītā and Rāma, Ūrmiḷā and Lakṣmaṇa, Māṇḍavi and Bharata, Śrutakīrti and Śatrughna.

The sages Viśvāmitra and Vaśiṣṭha fixed an auspicious moment for the four weddings, ■ moment decided upon in accordance with the astrological science, assuring an inseparable union between the married couples.

It was indeed a very holy day. In the early hours of the morning began the sacred music of Nādasvaram. As if in unison with it, the bells and drums in the city's temples and shrines sounded in strict conformity with the cadence of musical notes. As the sun's golden rays were dancing scintillatingly in the cloudless skies, the denizens of Mithila were performing their morning ablutions and rites with dedicated loyalty to tradition and religion. The womenfolk, as they were walking to the sacred river to fetch drinking water, were singing divine songs, seeking God's blessings for the young couples to be married that day.

The brides and the grooms were led to the bathing place and given the ceremonial function in preparation for the wedding.

WEDDING 'MAKE-UP'

The silken hairs of the brides were anointed with perfumed oil. Their faces were smeared with gold-hued turmeric paste. As the girls were finding themselves out of breath when the charmed waters were poured in profusion over their heads, their maids were pleasurably tickled and cracking jokes at the brides' discomfiture. After the ceremonial bath, the hairs of the brides were dried with the incense of sandal paste musk and other sweet-smelling fumes. Then the faces were smeared with sandal powder; their eyes were painted with mascara; their foreheads were adorned with saffron kumkum. Diamond earrings with ruby

fringes were fixed to their ears; diamond and pearl necklaces were hung around their necks. The brides wore silken sarees of red-and-gold colours. Their wrists were bedecked with diamond-studded bracelets, and their fingers with similar rings. The feet were painted with crimson paste and the ankles were decorated with tinkling anklets made of gold. As they were at last covered by gossamer white veils, they smilingly shone like the full moon through the clouds.

The bridegrooms were smeared with sanctified sandal powder and they put on gold-bordered silk dhotis. Bejewelled and sparkling crowns were placed on their heads and pearl necklaces on their necks; the fingers were decked with diamond rings and the waists were surrounded by diamond-cum-gold belts. They put on silver footwear. To look at them was a veritable feast for the eyes. The princes, learning about the wedding arrangements, were daydreaming about their blissful future.

The whole city of Mithila wore a festive look with flowery festoons hanging all over the streets. All the buildings of the town were kept scrupulously clean, and perfumed waters were sprinkled on their porches. Separate living quarters were arranged for the visitors of the two sexes. Besides the wedding party and the citizens of Ayodhyā, there were many invitees from other states and countries, and all of them were looked after with great care and billeted in palatial buildings.

Now the hosts, guests and visitors were occupying their respective places to witness the wedding ceremony. In the front row sat Daśaratha, Janaka and the king of Aṅga, along with the sages Viśvāmitra and Vaśiṣṭha.

All these decorations and arrangements, these assemblies and gatherings, made such a splendid sight as mankind could not have witnessed in its former history. As sacred and soulful music was being played, the happy guests were awaiting the auspicious moment of the weddings.

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

The gods in heaven were not quite favouring this auspicious event, for it was of a nature which would keep the couple united

for ever. In such a case there would be no scope for punishing the evil Rāvaṇa. Rāma alone is capable of killing Rāvaṇa, and some means must be devised to make the latter guilty of a crime towards the former.

Accordingly, the (demi) gods hatched a plan. They deputed the moon-god to assume the form of a Mohini (seductively alluring woman) and entertain the assembled guests with her song and dance.

There now is that Mohini, the world conquering beauty! Her arts and graces bewitched the assembly. All eyes were fixed on her. Oh! how captivating are her steps and movements, how charming her every expression of song and dance! Verily she appeared to be an embodiment of all the Muses! How skilful is the Creator who created her!

As Mohini was entertaining the gathering, making them all self-forgetful, the auspicious moment fixed for the weddings, passed by. And accomplishing her wily deed, the divine beauty disappeared. Only Vasiṣṭha realized that the right moment was gone, but he could not do or say anything to overcome the inscrutable and insurmountable ways of Destiny. None can override the decrees of Fate, and so he did not see fit to reveal the truth of the matter to others. By the time the guests pulled themselves together, King Janaka and the priests were ready to commence the wedding ceremony.

The chief priest of Janaka's court is Śatānanda, the son of Ahalyā. Learning from Viśvāmitra that his mother was freed from her cursed state by the grace of Rāma, he was delighted. It was a matter of further gratification to him that this saviour Rāma was chosen to be the husband of his king's daughter, Sītā.

Śatānanda narrated the names of the kings of the lunar lineage (the race of Janaka), and announced that King Janaka was all set for the performance of the wedding of Rāma and Sītā. Similarly, Vasiṣṭha recited the names of the solar race (Daśaratha's clan), and declared King Daśaratha's acceptance of the marriage proposal. At this the crowd cheered wildly. They were all eagerly waiting for the arrival of Rāma and Sītā on to the wedding altar.

It was a happy event— that the two mighty races of the Sun and the Moon should thus be united. For both the clance have all along been the champions and protectors of the rule of law and of the progress and prosperity of all their subjects.

Ah, there now come the princes of Ayodhyā! How pleasingly goodlooking they were! How fittingly were their heroic features stamped with all the marks of humility and of obedience to elders! There, he who is a personification of many grace, that blue-coloured figure of majesty, he must be the great Rāma! And the three lovable personalities, those dear brothers of the divine incarnation who follow in his footsteps with such propriety, they must be Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata and Śatrughna!

All the spectators were lovingly impressed by the sight of these smiling, charming princes.

At this point a sound of wild excitement emerged from the inner parts of the palace. The maids of harem were leading the bride to the altar. Ah, here comes the quintessence of all earthly and heavenly loveliness, the daughter of Mother Earth, the foster-child of King Janaka, the supreme symbol of Truth, Goodness and Beauty, Sītā! Behind her come the other beautiful, smiling brides, Ūrmilā, Māṇḍavī and Śrutakīrti. They were followed by several bridesmaids and servantmaids, carrying, in golden plates, various articles of cosmetics, flowers and fruits needed for the function. Both the brides and the grooms have now joined together at the altar. The guests feasted their eyes on the greatest sight they saw in their lives.

Janaka made ■ sign to the crowd asking for silence, and proceeded to the altar. He first greeted Sītā, and their glances met and spoke the mute language of indescribable mutual felicitation. The king kissed her on the forehead as ■ mark of blessing.

THE SACRED WEDDING

Śatānanda whispered something in the ear of Janaka, upon which the king addressed Rāma thus:

*“Iyam sītā mama sūtā, sahadharmachārī tava,
Pratīccha cainām bhadram te! pāṇim grhṇīṣva pāṇinā.”*

“Rāma, Lord Agni (Fire god) is the holy witness of this wedding function. Here now is my daughter Sītā. She will be your mate--- in mind, heart, body, soul--- all through your life. Accept her. All the good things will happen to you thereby. Now take her hand in yours. This holy help-mate of yours will always follow you, like your shadow, through thick and thin.”

Janaka followed his words with due action— he dipped Sītā's hands in the sanctified milk and then placed them in Rāma's. He then felt that his life's highest aim was accomplished. The joy of Daśaratha was equally great. The hearts of the saintly priests, Śatānanda and Vasiṣṭha, and of the sage Viśvāmitra, were exultantly filled. The great moment to which they all looked forward at last came.

Then Janaka handed over Ūrmiḷā to Lakṣmaṇa. Māṇḍavi to Bharata, Śrutakīrti to Śatrughna. All the four wedded couples went round the holy altar in salutation to Lord Agnī and as a mark of their mutual pledge in the presence of that Fire-God.

Afterwards, the sages recited the holy Vedic hymns blessing the young couples. The bride's maids handed to the brides and their grooms garlands made up of several sweet-scented flowers. Sītā had to garland the tall Rāma, and unable to reach his head, bent her head blushing. Realizing the significance of her blushes, Rāma bent down his head a little. Sītā then garlanded Rāma; and Rāma in his turn graced Sītā's neck with one of his own. The garlands further welded their two hearts together into one. Similarly the other three couples exchanged garlands, vowing one another eternal love and fidelity.

This wedding day is the most festive day in the history of India. On this day every year people everywhere celebrate the event with a renewed performance of the wedding ceremony in their own towns and villages. Sītā and Rāma are their ideal couple. Indeed, they look upon Sītā ■ their divine Mother and Rāma ■ their divine Father.

The wedding function came to ■ close. The pomp and splendour of that ceremony lingered in people's memory for long afterwards; the sound of that day's holy music was long ringing in

their ears. Both the gods in heaven and the guests on earth blessed the couples and praised the hosts and elders.

The wedding feast was of such sumptuousness and sweet taste that the guests wanted to partake more and more of the delicious preparations, the more they ate them.

Side by side, in the form of song and dance and drama, the story of Sītā and Rāma was being presented all over the city of Mithilā for the delectation of the visitors.

As for the two kings, they were in such magnanimous mood that they freely showered gifts of lands, cattle and money on the deserving pandits and the needy poor. The honourable guests were presented with various kinds of fruits and flowers and rich clothes.

This most memorable occasion in the annals of Mithilā was passing off gloriously. For four days the people feasted their eyes on it. On the fifth day King Daśaratha, his sons and daughters-in-law, and the sages were getting ready for their journey to Ayodhyā. Early that morning all the precious gifts that Sītā and other brides had to carry along with them to their new home, were got together in splendid fashion.

After taking the final ritual bath, Sītā bedecked herself with fresh silk garments and ornaments of all kinds made of different precious stones and gold. A packet of rice was tied around her waist as a mark of traditional ceremony; she also ate a little rice mixed with curd, as traditionally enjoined on the bride leaving for her new abode. The nādasvaram (wind instrument) was playing the parting song—“Fare thee well and may God bless you.” As the handing over of the bride to the groom and his people was being done, the bride’s people shed tears. For the tender, innocent girl who had all along been so fondly brought up by them was about to say goodbye to them.

King Janaka almost inconsolable. Oh! how mysterious the ways of the world! Even a wise saint-king like Janaka could not get over the common feelings of separation from one’s kith and kin! One wonders why so much attachment to the mundane things is the lot of mankind. All this is the mere instability of the

sentimental mind. Otherwise, why all this thoughtless bondage to one's parents, wife and children, and friends and relations? Are not all children of God equally important to one another? Then why this mutual bond between one's near and dear, causing either too much joy or too much grief, according as the occasion arises, and out of proportion with the equanimity which a little understanding of our common heritage should bestow on us? Perhaps we are all playthings of Fate and are subject to the whims and fancies of the games we are made to play by Providence!

A golden palanquin was ordered to take Sītā to Ayodhyā. The bride's maids led her to the palanquin. King Janaka stood nearby, shedding tears and almost motionless with grief. As he saw Sītā, he shook himself from his momentary torpidity, and beckoned to her to approach him. The innocuous Sītā could not at first realize the magnitude of her father's agony. But ■ he pressed her against his heart she shared with him that sad feeling which comes to people who part from one another after years of fond attachment.

If even foster parents suffer from such grief of attachment, how much more should be that of real parents! All those who saw the plight of Janaka found themselves moved to tears. Even the flora and fauna of the place seemed to be touched by the scene of parting and to be reluctant to be left behind by their darling Sītā.

At last sage Vasiṣṭha and king Daśaratha requested Janaka to pull himself together and give Sītā a happy send-off.

A FATHER'S ADVICE

The tearful Janaka thus addressed his beloved daughter: "Dear child, how can I spend my remaining days parted from you? When you leave me, who will ask me for all those childlike, feminine gifts of cosmetics and jewellery? Darling daughter, all these years I looked after you with a love that surpassed all my love for man or God. Now it is God's will that you should be Rāma's lifelong companion.

"It is my duty to advise you as to how you should comport yourself in your new role of ■ wife. You should always obey your lord and master, Rāma. You should ever so conduct yourself as ■

please your parents-in-law, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. Never forget that your husband is your God, and serve him with devotion and dedication. When you are away from your husband, please keep only good company. Take good care of the poor and the needy.

“Have at heart the fair name of the clans of both your parents and your parents-in-law. Let posterity remember for ever that the hearts of Sītā and Rāma are one. Even the souls of the forefathers of our two clans must be pleased with this alliance. The story of your marriage to Rāma should live in song and legend as mankind’s most cherished event. May the Lord God bless you with long life and happiness and health! May your husband survive you, making you a Sumaṅgalī (one who predeceases her husband) and may you bring forth good progeny! And, above all, dearest daughter, please never forget this foster-father of yours!”

Then Sītā further understood the depth of Janaka’s distress at the thought of parting from her. But what could she do? Her heart grieved for him. Warm tears fell from her eyes. Taking control of herself after a while, she replied: “Revered father, I know you are thus grieving for me in your deep love for me. But do you not yourself know that a female child has to be sent to a new home one day or the other? As a woman, my first allegiance is to my husband. My duty to you comes only next. So please do not grieve over something which has to be done dutifully. As for your counsel, I shall always obey it and only when my service to my husband is done, I shall think of you with due concern. Therefore, kindly bid me farewell without any regrets. I assure you once again I shall so conduct myself as to let the world look upon me as a deserving daughter of yours and a worthy wife of Rāma.”

Hearing Sītā’s soothing words, Janaka was partly consoled. Then he turned to Rāma and said: “Rāma, this daughter of mine is a very innocuous creature. She has till now led a carefree existence. I just cannot imagine her being put to the least little inconvenience hereafter, too. Even if she inadvertently does something she should not do, please forgive her. Kindly understand that this grief and these words of mine are merely dictated by my extreme love for her. I have implicit faith in you and her, and I advise you both not because either of you need advice but because my paternal heart naturally goads me to do so.”

Then Rāma replied: "Esteemed sir, I promise that I will always be faithful to Sītā and look after her without ever thinking of another woman in evil. Directly or indirectly, I will not cause even an iota of mental or physical pain to Sītā. I will always abide by truth and justice in my dealings with her. So please set your mind at rest."

These words greatly delighted Janaka. He ordered some of Sītā's maids to accompany her to Ayodhyā so that they, who well know her needs and habits, may attend on her constantly and carefully. Embracing her fondly for the last time, he conducted her into the palanquin and asked her dearest maid to be seated along with her to keep her company. Vasiṣṭha and Daśaratha took leave of him and proceeded on their return journey along with their entourage. Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata and Śatrughna bowed to him and took their leave. So did the three other brides.

Janaka took a last lingering look at Sītā. Sītā returned the look with equal intensity and affection. Their eyes met, but their lips were speechless. They took each other's leave, only through that mutual glance. Their hearts were still heavy with the sadness of parting. The palanquin-bearers lifted the palanquin and began their trek. As far as the sight of the palanquin reached him, Janaka kept on staring at it.

It was for the first time that Janaka was out of Sītā's sight in his life. He felt that his existence without Sītā would from then on be a burden to him. All around him he felt an emptiness

To Sītā also it was the first moment in her life away from her beloved father. She who had till then enjoyed his constant love and care, how would the future appear to her? He who looked upon her more precious than his own life, and could not bear to be out of her sight even for a minute, how would the rest of life appeal to him? Thus both were glancing back at each other, communicating their speechless concern for each other's welfare in that mute fashion.

Sītā was now torn between two contrary feelings. One was of joy--- at the attainment of a lifemate after her own heart. The other was of agony--- at the need to leave her foster-father who all

along cared for her with so much love and tenderness. Oh, how natural is this dichotomy among all newly married women!

Oh, dear Sītā, please do not feel uneasy about anything! You are indeed the luckiest of all women! You have for your husband the greatest of all men, and he reciprocates your love with equal intensity and fidelity. Your hearts are united now; may they remain so for ever! May your union be a constant source of inspiration and an example to all humanity for all time to come!

Viśvāmitra was a happy man. He bestowed on Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa all the divine gifts in his reach as a token of his gratitude for their help in the successful completion of his Yajña. It was he who was chiefly instrumental in bringing about the union of Rāma and Sītā. He handed back Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa safely to their father, as he promised. Thus all his aims were fulfilled, and now he could devote the rest of his life to the performance of unceasing penance and meditation in the sacred Himālayan region.

Viśvāmitra took leave of Vasiṣṭha and other sages, and approached Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Both the princes touched the dust of Viśvāmitra's feet in reverential salutation. The sage caressed them with tears of joyful fulfilment in his eyes. He blessed all the newly married couple, wishing them a long and happy wedded life. All of them were rapturously gratified by the sage's good wishes. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa thanked the good God that enabled them to be under the tutelage of such a great sage for some time. The sage and the princes took leave of one another with much mutual reluctance.

Such indeed is the eternal mutual regard between the teacher and the taught in this land of sacred cultural traditions. Actually, the teacher enjoys greater reverence than the father, because the former endows the pupil with a spiritual rebirth. And a true disciple is only he who regards such a preceptor as his living God. Similarly, he is a true Guru (teacher) who loves his Chela (student) more than he does his own offspring. Since both the sage and the princes were good illustrations of this sempiternal tradition, they were thus finding it difficult to be parted from one another. May such mutual regard between the teacher and the taught, this noble educational tradition, last for ever!

As the sage and the two princes were thus bidding farewell to one another with heavy hearts and long backward glances, Daśaratha and Vasiṣṭha silently admired their exemplary mutual relationship.

PARAŚURĀMA LEARNS A LESSON

As Daśaratha and his party were thus returning home, on their way they heard a thunderous noise. At that sound the birds in the trees were frightened and were flying hither and thither, uttering woeful cries. The beasts of the forest were running amuck in their fright. The force of the noise created stormy winds of such power ■ to uproot the trees. The very earth was trembling. The ■ hid behind the clouds. Although it was daytime, it was dark all round.

Paraśurāma's terrifying shadow fell on the scene. It was of the size of a gigantic mountain. Paraśurāma himself was sighted by the party. The former incarnation (preceding that of Rāma in the traditional ten incarnations) of a revengeful God was breathing fire, and burning sparks of anger emanated from his eyes. In his hand was a bow and on his shoulders an axe.

It was with this very axe that Paraśurāma, going round the earth twenty-one times, put to death millions of Kṣatriyas (warrior race) to avenge the death of his father, sage Jamadagni, who was killed by a Kṣatriya, Kārtavīryārjuna. As Jamadagni was performing his penance with closed eyes, Kārtavīryārjuna arrived at the hermitage. Since the sage could not see the king, he could not offer the latter due hospitality. Thereby Kārtavīryārjuna lost his temper and, without giving ■ thought to future consequences killed Jamadagni rightaway.

That was indeed a fateful moment; the nemesis of the Kṣatriya race was then inaugurated, and the inaugurator was Paraśurāma who swore to himself that he would take vengeance on the whole Kṣatriya class. Thus, for the folly of one of their thoughtless men, countless Kṣatriyas had to pay with their lives.

On seeing this arch-enemy of their race, Daśaratha and his party were terribly frightened and were trembling at what might follow.

Then Paraśurāma accosted Rāma thus: "Rāma, are you the great hero who broke Śiva's bow? Well, now come and show your might before me. Can you aim with this bow of mine? If you can, then you will be fit to fight with me."

Hearing these words, the terrified Daśaratha intervened and begged the terrifying Paraśurāma thus: "Revered sir, you are a good Brāhmin. You are not unaware of all the rules of law and justice. Is it right that you should punish the entire Kṣatriya race for the folly of one man? Besides, did you not promise Indra (the king of gods) that after the completion of your revenge (which was now over), during your twenty-one trips, you would hand over this earth to sage Kaśyapa and go back to your hermitage to meditate for the rest of your terrestrial life? Must you break your vow and stoop to kill this innocent lad, Rāma? Please take pity on us."

Paraśurāma came to the end of his predestined powers and had no thought for his own ill-judged actions. So he turned a deaf ear to Daśaratha's entreaty. He was also suffering from the evil effects of anger, which robs man of his sense of right and wrong. His sole aim was vengeance, pure and simple, unmindful of its rightness or wrongfulness. So how could he let Rāma go unchallenged?

Paraśurāma again turned to Rāma and said: "Rāma, the divine architect Viśvakarma manufactured two holy bows. One was that which you broke at Mithilā—the 'Śiva bow' the other is in my hands—the 'Viṣṇu bow'. If you break this one also, your strength will be proved and then I will fight with you ■ my equal."

Well, Rāma is ■ true-blue Kṣatriya, ■ scion of ■ noble warrior race. How could he take the abuse of Paraśurāma lying down? Besides, despite his father's entreaties, the thoughtless Paraśurāma was not willing to let him go. Therefore he had no other go than to fight with him. It is unthinkable that Rāma would ever shrink from accepting any similar challenge. Thus he was ready for the duel. He snatched the Viṣṇu bow from Paraśurāma's hands and aimed it. The sound that thereby arose shook the three worlds.

Rāma then told Paraśurāma: "Sir, you ■■■ a noble Brāhmaṇ, well-versed in all the Śāstras. As you also happen to be my elder in

years, I spared you: otherwise the arrow I aimed from this bow would have already killed you. But still, this arrow which is already aimed must not be withdrawn without hitting some target or other. So, for its effect, I have to ask you to surrender all the good results of your penance or to let me cut the movement of your feet. Take your choice and let me know quickly."

Paraśurāma already was experiencing the ebbing away of his strength, the moment the 'Viṣṇu bow' left his hands. With that action his power too passed over into Rāma. Like a severely wounded serpent, Paraśurāma was rapidly losing his might, and realizing the greatness of Rāma, he supplicated thus: "Rāma, really you are the incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu. Else, how could you have drawn away all my power? I need not feel ashamed because of my defeat at your hands. Please take away the good results of my penance. I can still use my feet and go to the Himālaya peak, mount Mahendra, and pray for my salvation."

Rāma did accordingly and swallowed the good results of his penance *Tapahphala*. Expressing his gratitude, Paraśurāma said: "Rāma, you are the personification of Truth. Your strength and valour are incomparable; you are unconquerable. Please excuse me and understand that all this thoughtlessness of mine was the result of my anger at the injustice done to my father by one of your race."

Speaking these words, Paraśurāma quietly walked away.

Daśaratha and his entourage were pleasantly surprised at Rāma's might and power. Like the autumn clouds, their fears flitted away. Praising the Lord for His goodness, they resumed their journey.

RE-ENTRY INTO AYODHYĀ

All over the city of Ayodhyā the news spread that Daśaratha was returning along with his sons and his daughters-in-law. A wild cheer of welcome went up as soon as the party was sighted near the town precincts.

Those were the days when the people shared the joys of their rulers, and the rulers reciprocated people's sentiments, equally.

The townsmen went up to Daśaratha and his party to welcome them back home. They all sang the praises of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa for the heroic feats they performed. As the royal party was proceeding along the streets, the men on both sides cheered them wildly and the women showered flowers on them from housetops and terraces.

The whole city was filled with unbounded joy. The king rewarded the deserving Brāhmaṇas and the needy poor people with rich gifts. All the denizens and the guests were treated to sumptuous feasts. Sparkling with multi-coloured lights all over, the city of Ayodhyā resembled Amarāvati, the capital of Heaven.

Sītā was much impressed by all this pomp and glory. She realized that Ayodhyā was in no way inferior to Mithila. She wondered how nice it would have been if her father too accompanied her here for she knew he would have been as pleased as she was at this reception and celebration. Thus several days passed in joy and entertainment.

One day Daśaratha called Bharata and told him: Son, your maternal grandfather, king Kekaya is anxious to see you and sent his son and your uncle, Yudhajit, to invite you. You may go with him and spend a few days in the company of your mother's people."

Bharata was pleased with the news and, receiving the blessings of all the elders, and taking Śatrughna along with him, he left for the town of Girivraja, his grandfather's capital.

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa dedicatedly attended to the needs of their father after the departure of Bharata and Śatrughna.

Obeying his father's wishes, Rāma was looking after the affairs of state and won the admiration of both the administrators and the people. Even while he was thus immersed in his princely duties, he never for a moment forgot Sītā. She always appeared before his mind's eye. For her part, Sītā loved Rāma even more than he loved her. The reason for this was that Sītā admired Rāma so much for his instinctive ability to gauge the innermost recesses of her heart.

The people of Mithilā were so well-disciplined, and their king so well-beloved, that all of them remained fresh in Rāma's memory. Thus, it was but natural that the nearest and the dearest of the Mithilā people, Sītā, should indelibly be printed on Rāma's mental faculties all the time.

Sītā and Rāma lived together in an exemplary manner. They were enjoying each other's company like Lord Viṣṇu and His consort Lakṣmī and in turn made the people around them happy and virtuous with their illustrious mutual love and good behaviour.

AYODHYĀ KĀṆḌA

Thus twelve years went by.

King Daśaratha's strength was slowly running down. He was gradually finding himself unable to bear the burden of the responsibilities of kingship. Therefore one day he called his ministers and told them: "Gentlemen, old age has come upon me. I seem to have neither the will-power nor the physical ability to look after the affairs of state. I do not think I shall live much longer. Rāma, my elder son, is in every respect worthy of being my heir. He has already won the hearts of the people, and he is capable of ruling them with their welfare at heart. He is sure to do great credit to the reputation of our Ikṣvāku dynasty. So I have decided upon transferring power into his hands. You are all learned men, well aware of all the facts. Please advise me as to what I should do now."

The ministers were pleased with the king's words, and commending his wish, suggested to him that he should also consult his feudal lords and the neighbouring rulers. The King accepted their advice, and accordingly sent word to those dignitaries. They all responded to the king's invitation and arrived in Ayodhyā.

The king's court was assembled. As soon as Daśaratha entered, all the assembled courtiers and other invitees stood up and saluted him. The king beckoned to them to be seated. They were all agog to hear the king's words.

Then Daśaratha addressed the assembly thus: "Honourable gentlemen, I am grateful to you all for coming here at my request. As you all know, till now I have been taking care of my people in conformity with the noble example set by my predecessors. The people, on their part, were conducting themselves with utmost affection and regard for me. The time has come for me to hand over the reign to my elder son Rāma, for I am past my prime.

Rāma is a very fit person for the kingly duty. Crowning him king, I hope to retire to the forest and spend the rest of my earthly life in penance. I hope you will all agree to this proposal of mine."

The whole court acquiesced in Daśaratha's wishes. What more could they wish for than that the noble Rāma should be their ruler?

Then Daśaratha told Vasiṣṭha, Vāmadeva, Sumantra and others among his intimates: "This is the month of Chaitra (first month of spring). The whole nature is resplendent with new growth and fresh greenery. This is the ideal time for Rāma's coronation. So kindly make all the needed arrangements. I also request the invited guests to witness the coronation celebrations and bless Rāma before returning home."

Vasiṣṭha and Sumantra were much pleased with the king's words. Sage Vasiṣṭha is the preceptor (Guru) of Daśaratha; Sumantra is his personal adviser. At the king's behest Sumantra went to Rāma's palace, conveyed the news of the coronation to him, and escorted him back to the court.

Rāma bowed to the feet of his father and stood in respectful attention. Daśaratha told him: "Rāma, you are innately endowed with all the virtues. You have won the admiration of our subjects. I am now old. So I made up my mind to transfer power to you. All the ministers, the people and our feudal lords and neighbouring rulers have commended my wish. Now please accept my suggestion and rule the people, making them all happy and at the same time bringing greater wealth and fame to our Ikṣvāku clan."

Rāma is not one to disobey his parents. So he readily acceded to his father's wish.

When messengers brought the news of Rāma's intended coronation to Kausalyā, she rewarded them with diamond necklaces. The news spread all over the city, and the citizens went wild with joy and, gathering in the streets in their thousands, were causing obstruction to traffic. On every one's lips were the tales of Rāma's glory and the praises for Daśaratha's welcome decision.

But this glad news did not yet reach Kaikeyī's ears. The king was having bad dreams that night. Worried by them, the next

morning he consulted his astrologers. They told him that the dreams portended bad events. Then Daśaratha sent word for Sumantra.

Meanwhile the king said to Rāma: "Dear son, last night I had bad dreams. The astrologers say evil is to befall us. On the other hand, they already fixed tomorrow as the auspicious day for the coronation. Tonight you and Sītā must fast and lie down on a leaf-bed. You must ask your bodyguards to keep relentless watch. Be on your guard yourself. Bharata is now out of station. This is the opportune moment for your coronation. He is obedient to you, no doubt, but men's minds are fickle and may be influenced by evil counsels. Forestalling any such eventuality, we must hurry through this coronation."

Rāma found these words strange. He had implicit faith in his younger brothers. He could not guess what reason his father had to doubt Bharata's good faith. Even if Bharata wanted to succeed their father on the throne, Rāma would gladly agree to his wish. Not only Bharata; he would not mind if either Lakṣmaṇa or Śatrughna sought, the crown. After all, weren't all the four brothers equal heirs to the throne? He thought it wasn't right that his coronation should take place in Bharata's absence, but he could not say 'no' to his father. Nor could he dream of advising his father, the equal of God to him, and so, quietly, took his leave of him and went to meet his mother, Kausalyā. There she, Sumitrā, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa were eagerly awaiting his return from the court. As soon as they saw him, they were enraptured. Rāma told them the news. Kausalyā embraced him and said: "Rāma, how fortunate I am! How benign is the good God! May He bless you with long life and happiness! May He grant you the power to be invincible against your foes and merciful to your subjects! May your fame spread over the four corners of the earth and may you bring lasting glory to Ikṣvāku race! May your beloved mate, Sītā, and your brothers always follow in your footsteps! May all the gods in heaven for ever watch you and keep you safe and sound!"

Rāma thanked her and bowed to Sumitrā. Nodding smilingly to Lakṣmaṇa, he went back to his palace, along with Sītā.

Lakṣmaṇa's thoughts were still concentrated on Rāma. He was such a loyal brother that he always considered Rāma's joy or grief as his own. He was silently praying to God to grant that Rāma's coronation should pass off without any untoward event.

As for Sītā, all this seemed to her ■ dream.

Sumitrā, on her part, remained quiet, because she was by nature ■ thoughtful and resourceful lady and could face the future stoically.

THE AUSTERE VIGIL

Sage Vasiṣṭha went up to Rāma's palace. There he instructed Rāma and Sītā in the apt hymns and asked them to fast for the night.

Outside the palace, the neighbouring streets were jam-packed, with the crowds eagerly awaiting the coronation hour.

After the fasting ceremony was over, Vasiṣṭha went to meet the king. At that very moment, Daśaratha experienced some signs, foreboding evil. Consequently he was dejected. Seeing the king's state of despair, the sage consoled him as best he could, and returned to his abode.

Rāma and Sītā finished their fasting vigil, and then took their ceremonial bath. Later they went to the temple. Concentrating their thoughts on the presiding deity of the kingdom, the worthy couple performed a ritual befitting the occasion. Offering the ordained oblations to the Lord, they later partook of the remaining ritual food. On that night they observed the vow of silence, and lay down on sacred grass, meditating on Lord Viṣṇu.

MANTHARĀ'S COUNSEL

Mantharā, the maidservant of Kaikeyī, happened to go up to the terrace of the palace. Thence she glanced around the city of

Ayodhyā. Seeing all that splendour of the decorated streets and all that joyous celebration of the masses, she was wonder-struck and could not make out the reason for it all.

Now, this Mantharā is an old hag. She is also hunchback, popularly called "kubjā". Her thought-processes are as crooked as her features. Her mind is the home of intrigue and envy. But Kaikeyī has a special affection for her, because she was brought from the queen's birthplace.

As she was thus wondering, Mantharā's eyes fell on a girl playing around there, with self-forgetful joy. She cried to the child: "Hey, you, what's the reason for all your jollity? Why are all these streets festooned? Why do the flags fly in proud glory all over the housetops and towers? Why do I hear sacred music all around? What made all these crowds dance with joy in the public? Why did queen Kausalyā bestow large gifts on the deserving scholars and the poor? And why do you yourself wear this festive dress?"

The girl was amused at Mantharā's ignorance, and said: "Oh, don't you know that Rāma is going to be crowned tomorrow?"

Well, the child had no way of imagining the effect of her words, being still unaware of the ways of the world. But this was a critical moment.

The child's words broke the heart of the jealous woman. Uncontrollable anger pervaded her whole being. She rushed down the stairs and ran up to Kaikeyī's room. At that moment the queen was asleep.

Mantharā woke her up and told her: "Now, friend, you are going to be a prey to ill-luck. Your days of glory are going to end. You poor creature, is this the time for you to sleep like a log? Get up!"

Kaikeyī could not understand what made Mantharā so angry. She was afraid of what might happen to her. She asked Mantharā: "Friend, you look like the personification of wrath. Tell me, am I going to suffer any great misfortune?"

Mantharā replied: "Child, your father sent me as your companion when you were married to Daśaratha. Now, along with you I too ~~am~~ to endure distress. Listen. Your husband has deceived you with soft words, and sent away your son Bharata to a far off country. There is ~~a~~ conspiracy behind this. He is now making all the arrangements for the coronation of Kausalya's son, Rāma. Don't you remember that Daśaratha promised your father, before your wedding, that he would make your son the crown prince? Now he is going back on his word. Yes, the minds of kings are fickle. Why all this hurry for the coronation in Bharata's absence, and that without informing you and your son? I tell you this is all a plot. My heart breaks at your plight. I never dreamt you would be subjected to such ~~a~~ fate. If you now remain idle, you are sure to suffer agonies."

Contrary to her maid's expectations, the queen's heart ~~was~~ gladdened at the news of Rāma's coronation. She thought that Mantharā's words were the result of her excessive affection for her, and laughing at Manthara's folly, told her: "Friend, I want to present you with this diamond necklace, for you brought ~~me~~ good news. This day is a really auspicious one. What more could I wish for than that the eldest son of Daśaratha, the best and the noblest of men, the merciful and the bountiful one, the scholar and the lover of all mankind, Rāma, should succeed his father? Besides, you know Rāma has greater regard for me than even for his own mother, and ~~I~~ love him more than my own son Bharata. I know perfectly well that after Rāma ascends the throne he will treat equally all his kith and kin, all his people and followers. I am sure his reign will be the most ideal of all time."

Kaikeyī's words displeased Mantharā. She thought that the queen could not quite grasp the extent of her agony, and with a sigh of exasperation admonished Kaikeyī: "Oh, how innocuous you are! You remind me of a moth falling on the flame, taking it for a fruit, of a beast attracted by ~~a~~ huntsman, of a fish succumbing to the temptation of the fisherman's bait. You really fell into the trap of your husband. So ~~I~~ have now come to rescue you from your predicament.

"Listen. When Rāma is crowned king, he will drive away Bharata from this kingdom. You know why? Because—two swords

cannot be accommodated in ■ single sheath. No nation can be ruled by two kings, and Bharata has the potentials of ■ king. Fearing Bharata's possible rivalry, Rāma will not even flinch from killing him clandestinely. Also remember that you insulted Kausalyā on many a former occasion. Do you think she will spare you now that she has the chance of taking vengeance on you, by advising her son against your best interests? Then would you not be like an empty straw? Would not your luck come to an end? I tell you, the king's love for you has weakened. In the future it may go down even further. There is only one way out for you. Now is the time for you to take recourse to all your wiles. You must hatch ■ plot, ■ result of which Rāma will have to be exiled in the forest and your son Bharata will be crowned king in his place."

INDECISION

Kaikeyī's heart was bowed down with grief. She was greatly frightened. She was, unfortunately, convinced by the vile counsel of her maid, and thought that her son would be in much jeopardy. Her whole being trembled with fright. She could not think logically. Her mind was wandering and became the home of doubt and hatred; her heart was poisoned with suspicion. She began to distrust the king. Why did he not inform her beforehand about the coronation of Rāma? What was the mystery behind keeping herself and Bharata uninformed? Was her husband really losing his love for her? Was, after all, his love ■ pretence? Slowly she ■■■■ to the conclusion that Mantharā's words were true.

Why did this 'kubja' ever come to life in this world? Was it to ruin the happy family life of ■■ innocent couple? Was it to besmirch the reputation of Ikṣvāku dynasty? Yes, there are many such Mantharā's in this world. She is only one of the many of her sex who would dare stoop to any kind of evil to achieve their aims. Of course, it is not only women, but men too resort to such evil. The reason for this human degradation is their passion and prejudice. Not until do these internal enemies of man ■■■■ conquered by him is there salvation for the human race.

Looking at the pensive Kaikeyī, Mantharā was sighing disconsolately. Kaikeyī then told her: "Friend, tell me the way to

Bharata's safe future. I have no better adviser than you. True, all men are cheats; they forget their solemn promises when preoccupied with their public affairs. Why did the king, who loves me so much, hide the news of the coronation from me? Did he think that I would come in his way? Did he merely use me as a plaything of an idle hour, and never really love me? Now I am like a person drowning in the ocean and I cannot think of the way out of my misfortune. Tell me how you can save me from this crisis."

Well, Mantharā's plan bore fruit. Her obsession is with the welfare of Kaikeyī and Bharata; she has no care for the fair name of the Ikṣvāku race. Realizing that the time was ripe for taking vengeance upon Kausalyā, and consequently disturbing the peace of mind of Daśaratha and Rāma, she told Kaikeyī in honeyed words: "Dear friend, don't worry. How forgetful you became! Don't you remember the fight between the angels and the demon Śabara in the Daṇḍaka forest? Didn't Daśaratha, who was aiding the angels, take you along with him? Didn't you nurse the wounds of the king and win his admiration and gratitude? Don't you remember the grateful king offered you two favours, which you could choose rightaway? But you replied you would demand them from him at your will. I actually heard that conversation. Now is the opportune moment for you to seek those two promised favours from the king. One should be—to send Rāma on exile into the jungles; the other, the crowning of Bharata as the successor to Daśaratha. The kings of Ikṣvāku clan are not known to go back on their word. Even if Daśaratha may not agree to your wishes, Rāma will honour your wishes when he learns the truth—for Rāma considers his father's fair name as his own."

Rays of new hope dawned on Kaikeyī's countenance. She looked on Mantharā as Bharata's guardian angel, and was willing to follow her instructions.

Mantharā proceeded: "Child, throw away all your ornaments hither and thither. Put on a worn-out saree. Untie your hairdo and cover your face with your hairs. Lie down on the bare floor and keep weeping and pretend anger. When your husband approaches you and tries to find out the reason, consolingly, don't answer him. And don't ever stop your sobbing. Keep the lamp in the room very low. In the semi-darkness your husband, as is natural to all men

will be lustfully excited and will grant you any favour you seek---let alone the promised ones. Bring him round to your way of thinking with sweet words, which, after all, are the fruit of your inborn character. Now, don't worry at all about anything. As long as I am alive, I, who owe my livelihood to you, will see that no harm comes to you."

Kaikeyī's mind was at rest. She made up her mind to ask the king for the two favours.

Just as the kings trust their court companions, like jesters and scholars, so do the queens implicitly believe in the counsels of their women companions and maids of the harem. This is not always a good thing; the evil fruits of this trustful royal nature are now to be seen in Kaikeyī's conduct.

Meanwhile the king wanted to spend the night in peace and pleasure in the company of his beloved young consort Kaikeyī. Even before he reached the harem, he had an uneasy feeling. Kaikeyī, who usually welcomes him smilingly, was not to be seen anywhere. The usually brightly-lit bedroom was in darkness. Moreover, he could hear faint wails. He began to be frightened. As he, trembling with fear, entered the room, he could barely see the form of a woman in rags, her hair dishevelled, lying down on the hard floor. When coming closer, he saw it was Kaikeyī. He was struck by both anger and sorrow. He wanted to find out who it was that caused such agony to his beloved wife, and asked her: "Darling, please tell me who made you unhappy. Whoever he is, I will punish him."

Actually, Daśaratha's attachment to Kaikeyī was more of a blindly lustful nature than of a trustfully loving one. He cajoled and begged her in various ways. All his wiles and skill failed to elicit a reply from her. Driven by an inexorable Fate, Daśaratha took for a fact all the pretentious behaviour of Kaikeyī, and again addressed her tenderly: "Kaikeyī, I am unable to bear the sight of your distress. Are you physically unwell? If so, shall I call in the physician? Or, have I done you any harm? Knowingly I did nothing to hurt you. If I offended you unwittingly, please let me know. I swear upon Rāma that I will fulfil any wish of yours."

GRANTING THE FAVOURS

Kaikeyī was inwardly very much delighted with the king's words, and, with a grace of manner that completely bewitched the king, replied: "Sir, **men** are capable of breaking their promises. In order to seduce the women, they make all sorts of false promises. How can I believe that you would fulfil my wishes? If you like the nature of my wish, you may; but if you don't you wouldn't perhaps even stop from putting an end to my life. For, the swords of kings **are** meaningfully double-edged."

Thus Mantharā's plan was bearing fruit. The king was caught in her ruse. In further promising Kaikeyī, he again swore upon his most beloved son, Rāma. He could not realize that this promise was a terrible blow to the people and the kingdom of Kosala.

Then, wiping her tears, Kaikeyī said: "Sir, others have done me no harm. Don't you remember the two favours you promised me when I helped you during your fight with Śambara?" The king said he did. Kaikeyī then said: "A little while ago you also swore **to** Rāma that you would fulfil my demands. You must realize that all the visible and invisible world bears witness to your promises, and that you must not spoil the fair **reputation** of your dynasty by going back on your sworn word. Well now, I have made up my mind to request you those two promised boons at this moment. One is that my son Bharata should be crowned prince; the other is that Rāma should spend fourteen years in exile like **a** hermit. There! Keep your word!"

On hearing these harsh words, Daśaratha lost consciousness, like **a** man struck by thunder. All around him was dark. No words came out of his lips. After a while, he came to. He knew not what to do next. He wondered whether all that was going on was a dream or **a** hallucination or **the** effect of his former birth's misdeeds. Then he turned his glance on Kaikeyī. She looked like a fearful witch to him. Like a deer terrified by the sight of **a** tiger, he began to tremble all over. Like a snake mesmerised by the snake-charmer he lost all **control** of motion. He thought: "Is it surprising that **a** poisonous snake fed with milk should bite its **own** nourisher?" He saw that in Kaikeyī passion and hatred were playing a wild dance. Again he fell in a swoon.

As for Kaikeyī, what does it matter if the kingdom of Kosala should suffer? What use is the land's prosperity as long as she and her son have no powerful place in it? She was quite prepared to play ducks and drakes with the fair name of Ikṣvāku dynasty. Hers is ■ stony heart. To achieve her ends, she would stoop to any evil step she had to take.

His consciousness regained, Daśaratha pleaded with Kaikeyī: "You are a good woman. Perhaps you are trying to test my love for Bharata. For, what harm did Rāma do to you? You know very well that Rāma loves you more than his own mother. And I know that you for your part love him ■■ much as even more than Bharata. So what made you take this unwise step of sending Rāma in exile? Please drive away this evil thought from your mind. Please don't wound my feelings. At my age I ■■■ not able to withstand such a cruel test from you. I cannot live even ■ second without Rāma near me. So I once again beg you to save ■■■ and the honour of our clan. Please ask some other favours instead of these two."

Kaikeyī did not reply him. She was firmly persuaded by Mantharā's counsel. Her only care now was to ensure the safety of Bharata's future. There was no place in her heart for any kind of mercy. Verily, ■ woman's heart is as hard as it is soft. Even as she is prepared to give up her life for another's good, so is she prepared to take another's life for her own good.

Finding no response from his spouse, Daśaratha said: "Kaikeyī, you are no normal woman. You ■■■ demon purposely born to destroy the Ikṣvāku clan. What wrong did Rāma do that I should banish him? You know that he never himself sought the throne of Kosala kingdom. How ■■■ you bring yourself to be merciless towards Rāma who has always been holding you in high esteem? Aren't you impressed by the divine grace in Rāma's features and actions, and by the love and the regard all the people of the kingdom have for him? Oh, please don't torture this old man. Please take pity on me."

Kaikeyī's heart was stone-hard. There ■■■ no way of its melting. The king's words fell ■■ it without avail. She said: "Sir, if you go back on your sacred word, you have no right to talk of truth

and justice. Wouldn't your brother kings and your subjects scorn you if you break your promise to your queen? Don't you remember the deeds of sacrifice performed by the ancients in order to fulfil their promises? Why did emperor Śibi offered his flesh to the eagle? Why did Alarka pluck out his eyes to honour his promise to Vedavid? Why does the mighty Ocean-god refrain from crossing the seashore? Just for the sake of Rāma and Kausalyā, don't throw away your sacred obligations to truth and duty. If you do not honour my wishes I shall take my life in your presence. Then Bharata too would kill himself. Thereafter you may crown Rāma and enjoy yourself in the company of Kausalyā."

Yet again Kaikeyī's words struck the king dumb. Pulling himself together after a while he said: "You wretch, how foolish you are! Do you think that Bharata would fall in with your wicked wishes? Don't you know that if I agree to your proposals the people would blame me for my weakness in yielding to a woman's whims and for banishing the best of men, Rāma? How can I, Kausalyā, Sumitrā, Sitā and others, near and dear to him, live without Rāma in our midst? Oh, how foolishly I was taken in by your good looks, like an animal trapped and a weakling drunk? Alas, Rāma would obey me and go to the jungles. Then Kausalyā and Sumitrā would die. You sinful creature, what sort of joy would you get from such a state of affairs? If, according to your wishes, Bharata will accede to being the crowned prince, he will lose the right to perform my funeral rites. How unfortunate is Bharata in having you for his mother! You really belong to that class of women who would kill even their husbands to get what they want. But don't presume that if you kill your husband and make Bharata king, the people of this kingdom will let you escape with your lives."

Still there was no change of heart in Kaikeyī. Ah, such is the irony of fate. Else, why would such a thoughtful woman turn so cruel? What else does her act signify but the vain vendetta against Kausalyā and Daśaratha? All this resembles the folly of a drowning man wishing to induce others to share his fate.

There must be some strong reason behind the sad lot of such an exemplary king like Daśaratha. Just like Yayāti who was

pushed down to earth after enjoying the fruits of his penance in heaven, so also must Daśaratha have been guilty of a sinful act formerly.

Kaikeyī replied him in a harsh voice: "O King, you say that you always speak the truth! Is it proper that you should now change your mind and deceive me after solemnly promising in the presence of gods that you would fulfil my wishes? Please do not waste your time, and mine, any more, and do as I requested you. Bharata's coronation must take place. So send word to him rightaway."

Daśaratha lost all hope. Realizing that it would be futile to argue with her any more, he glanced upward to the sky and lamented: "O night, stay on ■ you are! Otherwise dawn will arrive. How then can I convey this sad news to all those people who have come to witness Rāma's coronation? Oh how intensely would they grieve when they learn the news! Perhaps they would revolt because of their extreme regard for Rāma, if he is sent in exile. In those flames of popular revolt, Kaikeyī, Bharata and I would be consumed."

Would the huntsman take pity on ■ weeping deer? Nor did Kaikeyī. Looking at this merciless queen, Daśaratha again said: "Kaikeyī, pay heed to these my final words. I married you in the presence of holy fire. Why should you mete out such unjust punishment to me? I am prepared to cede the whole kingdom of Kosala to you. You may yourself place it in the custody of Rāma. In that case your self-sacrifice will be for ever praised. So don't come in the way of Rāma's coronation, which has been acclaimed and is being looked forward to by each and every one. Please follow the wishes of our people. If you do not, here and now I ■■ going to leave you and your son to your own fates. But be warned that instead of your son's coronation you will be witnessing the scene of my last rites. You wretch, get out of my sight. I no longer want to see your hateful visage. I want to concentrate my sight only on Rāma. Please send for Rāma immediately. Before I breathe my last, I should like to feast my eyes on him. This foolish old ■■■ is in ■ helpless state because of his bounden duty."

Oh, the irony of fate! Who can check the progress of time? Already three-quarters of the night ■■ gone; the last quarter has

dawned. Dogs and foxes were uttering their harsh cries, as though foreboding the evil to come. Presently the crimson rays of the morning sun began to appear. The benign Sun-god was awakening the whole creation to a renewed life of daily duties. Every one has assembled to see Rāma's coronation and were eagerly awaiting Daśaratha's orders for the pleasant ceremony.

The court priest Vasiṣṭha called on Sumantra and told him: "Honoured minister, all arrangements have been made for the coronation ceremony. The people are also anxious to witness it. Please hurry up and send for the king, for the auspicious moment is fast approaching."

Then Sumantra went to Kaikeyī's private quarters. There the king was lying on the ground in forlorn state. Seeing the king in such a predicament, Sumantra was awe-struck, for he felt as though he were in the presence of grief which took human shape. Approaching the king, Sumantra addressed him: "Your Majesty, the time for the coronation has come. Sage Vasiṣṭha made all the arrangements and asked me to inform you of the fact. People are waiting for you to come soon and crown Rāma."

Hearing Rāma's name somewhat helped Daśaratha to regain his wits. But still he was in the throes of surging agony. Kaikeyī then addressed Sumantra, who stood humbly, aware of the coming misfortune: "Sumantra, the King spent a sleepless night in ecstasy. He is just about to go to sleep. Maybe he is dreaming a bad dream and is therefore gibbering. Please send for Rāma." Upon which, Sumantra went to fetch Rāma.

OLD MEMORIES

Suddenly a memory of his youth came as a flash upon Daśaratha. Once he went a hunting in the forest. There he happened to hear a rumbling sound in the nearby river. Taking the sound to be that of a wild beast drinking water, he aimed his arrow at it and hit the target, thanks to his skill of merely following the sound of his prey even when it is not in sight. However, the target happened to be not an animal, but the son of a sage. The boy is the only son of a blind old couple. He went to fetch water for his parents' ablution, and the bubbles that emerged when he dipped

his vessel into the water caused that rumbling sound. As ill-luck would have it, Daśaratha mistakenly hit the hermit's son. The wounded boy cried out: "Revered parents, some cruel hunter has hurt me. I am about to die. Who will now serve you helpless old couple?" Uttering a cry to God for mercy on his unfortunate parents, he breathed his last.

Here his parents were awaiting their son's return. As the minutes were passing by, without his coming back, they began to be worried. Oh, who can check the march of an inexorable fate?

Daśaratha heard the boy's cries and, carrying him in his arms, took him near his parents. Then he sought the forgiveness of the old couple. On hearing the king's words, the old parents were bowed down with sorrow. Everything seemed a void to them. Grieving for their lost son for a while, they said: "O king, we are blind old people. This boy is our only offspring. All our hopes are pinned on him. Who will now look to our needs? How can we now survive in this world? What use is this existence without our darling boy? We too are ready to join him in his pilgrimage to the world of death. But before that we must curse you. May you also die in the absence of your sons!"

So cursing the king, the old couple lamented: "Oh son, how can we survive you? Here! we are following you" And so they too died uttering those words.

Daśaratha now remembered that incident and realized that he was now paying for his past misdeed. As there was no circumventing the inexorable laws of Fate, he was meekly awaiting Rāma's arrival.

Unaware of all this, Rāma and Sītā were still getting ready for the coronation, when Sumantra called on them. On being informed of Kaikeyī's request, Rāma left for her abode.

As for the general public, they were also still uninformed about the new turn events have taken. As soon as they saw Rāma passing by, they were enraptured and shouted, "Long live Rāma! May God bless Rāma!" Rāma duly acknowledged their good wishes and slowly made his way through the crowd towards Kaikeyī's palace.

IRONY OF FATE

Rāma's left shoulder and eye were throbbing. He is no ordinary mortal. He is a stoic and a hero who can accept misfortune with good grace.

But still, he was a little taken aback when Kaikeyī, who all along loved him so much, did not come forward to receive him. All the palace attendants were standing motionless statues. As he entered Kaikeyī's bedroom, he saw Daśaratha in a shrivelled form, resembling the lily in the sun. He could not understand the reason for his father's sad state. The naturally merciful Rāma found all this heart-rending. He bowed to the king and the queen obediently.

Daśaratha merely managed to say 'Rāma' and could speak no more. Tears rolled down his cheeks, and he once again swooned.

Rāma addressed Kaikeyī: "Mother, how strange is all this! Even when he is in an angry mood, my father speaks to me cordially. What's the reason for his grief? Have I committed any folly? Or is he suffering from some illness? Please satisfy my curiosity immediately."

Kaikeyī replied: "Rāma, your father is not sick. Nor is he angry with anyone. He has decided upon doing certain things, and since they concern you adversely, he is hesitant about speaking his mind to you. Of course, you are never known to break your promises; you implicitly follow your father's instructions. So please obey his orders and relieve him of his distress. Else, you would be a blot on the Ikṣvāku escutcheon."

Rāma obediently said: "Mother, is it right that you who know me so well should distrust me? Each word that falls from my father's lips is an inviolable law to me. I cannot really repay my filial debt to him even by offering my life to him. So please note that I am ever fully prepared to abide by his wishes."

The pleased Kaikeyī thought: "How dutiful and thoughtful is Rāma! How few are such people in this world! May Rāma's name and fame traverse the universe and may they shine for ever! There, how divinely replendent is his visage!"

Then the thought of Bharata crossed her mind. It was only thoughtless greed that led her astray. How could she gauge the depths of Bharata's heart? A mother's heart is always set upon her own son and it has no place for others. She thought that if Rāma became king he might put Bharata to trouble. She could not bear the thought of such an eventuality. Verily, this unthinking mother-love produces uneasiness and fear. An uneasy, fearful mind is the root of all folly. Again Kaikeyī's heart turned stone-hard.

She said: "Rāma, you spoke as befitting your reputation. What holier deed is in this world than to fulfil one's father's wishes? Now, please listen. Once your father promised me two favours. Now I am going to seek them from him, because this is the opportune moment. One is that Bharata be crowned at the auspicious moment chosen for you; the other is that you should spend fourteen years in exile in a forest. Well your father, because of his love for you, seems to be unable to make good his promise. Do you think it is right on his part to go back on his word? The time has come to vindicate the fair name of Ikṣvāku race. I don't want to speak to you if you too are like your father in breaking promises. If you are not like him, please don't covet the throne; put on saffron robes and go to the forest; for Bharata's coronation must take place right now."

Rāma heard her words unshaken in his demeanour and resolve. Even a diamond cannot shine bright unless cut and polished. So also the present test was to prove Rāma's character and enhance his glory. To that extent Kaikeyī really provided the means for his divinely idealistic role.

Smilingly Rāma replied: "Mother Kaikeyī, are these all your wishes? My prime duty is to obey my father. So I will fulfil your wishes. Hitherto you loved me more than Bharata. I will be grateful to you for ever. Please send for Bharata just now. I am ready to go to the forest. What dearer task have I than to entrust Bharata with the reigning of our kingdom? I am always prepared to meet his demands. Even if my father ordered me thus I would have gladly obeyed him. Doesn't he know my principles? Perhaps, owing to his fatherly love, he hesitated to ask me directly. Anyway, let me reassure you that I do not at all flinch from the

sojourn in the forest. On the contrary, I am thankful to you for giving me this opportunity of meeting and serving the saints and sages doing penance there."

Again Kaikeyī mused: "Rāma's generosity is indeed praiseworthy. How few are such heroes who live up to their ideals in this world! How lucky is Kausalyā who bore such a personage!"

Rāma's visage was shining brightly. However, at the same time Bharata's profile also came to her mind. Some uncanny force has entered Kaikeyī and affected her natural goodness adversely. She was highly elated at Rāma's acceptance of her demands. But she has yet to realize that greed paves the way to grief. She was under the mistaken impression that Bharata would be pleased with her actions. How foolish she was in hoping that a child born of divine grace would stoop to such folly in usurping his own elder brother! All this she could not visualise in her thoughtlessly selfish love for her child. She was caught in the snare of self-delusion and cannot escape its effects.

For his part Daśaratha was bowed down with inconsolable grief. Kaikeyī did not change her mind. She told Rāma: "Please do not waste the precious moments. You don't have to wait for a direct command from your father. You already assured me of your willingness to obey him. So go at once to the jungles and keep up the traditional name and fame of the Ikṣvāku race."

RĀMA'S AGONY

Kaikeyī's words struck Rāma's heart like an arrow. It was not her wishes that hurt him, but the fact that she who loved him till then so much should now forget his self-sacrificing nature and doubt his good faith. Pitying her narrow-mindedness, he said: "Mother, is this how you understood me? Rest assured that you will obtain the boons you sought from my father. Don't think I am delaying because of my fear to go to the forest. I only wanted to reiterate that nothing is dearer to me than to oblige you and let Bharata rule this kingdom of Kosala. I am sure he will fulfil all his obligations to our people and our father. So let me take my leave of you."

Leaving Kaikeyī's presence, he beckoned to Lakṣmaṇa to accompany him. Learning the facts from Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa was immensely angered. He would have there and then cut Kaikeyī's throat, had he not respected Rāma's allegiance to his duty and to his parents. He would not have minded any misfortune he himself might have to suffer, but he could not bear with fortitude the injustice done to his dearest brother, Rāma.

As Rāma, followed by Lakṣmaṇa, was passing through the streets, his sight fell upon the vessels arranged in a row and filled with holy waters in preparation for his coronation. He went round them in reverential obedience. He could not find there the white canopy that should have been placed above his head. Seeing that already his own coronation was being set aside, he signed to the people to go back to their respective places calmly. The people, while obeying him dutifully, began to wonder what sort of calamity was to befall them. Rāma proceeded to the residence of Kausalyā to inform her of his decision to go to the forest...

The characterisation in *Rāmāyaṇa* is unique. Man's passions and prejudices, and the way they determine his predicament and his forbearance, were exquisitely depicted in it. Who can remain unmoved when he reads about Daśaratha's parental love, Rāma's self-sacrificing fortitude, Kaikeyī's covetousness, Lakṣmaṇa's fraternal reverence? What a genius Vālmiki is! The great sage could so portray the story of Rāma with his matchless skill as to move even stones to tears. Is it surprising that wherever Rāma's story is sung or narrated Hanumān (and every devotee of Rāma) would stand in respectful supplication and shed tears of joy? If only every one of us could emulate the supreme example of Hanumān, who could lose himself in his devotion to Rāma and thereby experience his individual self's unity with the Supreme Self, the world would be a better place to live in. May Lord Rāma grant each one of us His Grace so that we may follow Hanumān's example!

As Rāma entered Kausalyā's palace, he saw every one there in high spirits, awaiting the moment of his coronation. The attendants, dressed in silken garments, washed his feet with holy waters; the womenfolk offered him *ārati*. How could they foresee what was to happen to him?

The building itself was charmingly decorated. Inside her prayer room, Kausalyā was engaged in worshipping her favourite goddess with multi-coloured flowers and with fragrant incense, in the hope of seeing her dear son's coronation coming to ■ successful conclusion and of his ruling his people in such a way as to achieve everlasting renown.

When informed of Rāma's arrival, she made her final devotional bow to the sacred godly image, and went forward to greet him with overflowing ecstasy. Rāma bowed to her feet and accepted the holy oblation she offered him. Kausalyā was filled with redoubled joy and was waiting for the news of his fast-approaching moment of coronation. Asking him to be seated on ■ high chair, she said: "Dear Rāma, today you are going to be crowned prince. Take my blessings. Rule the people with love and receive their due affection in return. May you shine as the most precious diamond in the crown of Ikṣvāku race!"

MOTHER AND CHILD

Seeing Kausalyā's unawareness of the recent events, Rāma began to cogitate sadly: "How innocuous is my mother! Oh, would she be able to withstand the heartbreak this sad news would cause her? Would she survive the separation from me! Alas, what unhappiness my parents have to suffer because of me! Oh what ■ wretch I am that I should deprive myself of serving them in their old age and thus leave them in distress!"

Then he spoke to her aloud: "Dear mother, I am going to tell you bad news. I have no right to take this noble seat. ■ must from now on be seated on the bare floor. Please hear me patiently and bless me. On Kaikeyī's request my father has ceded the kingdom of Kosala to Bharata and asked me to go to the forest for fourteen years. I am about to fulfil his orders. So kindly give me your blessings."

Hearing these words, the old queen broke down and fell to the ground like a cut plantain sapling. No words came out of her lips. Slowly Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa lifted her up on her feet. All around them an atmosphere of mute grief was felt.

Gradually, Kausalyā came to senses, and, falling on Rāma's shoulders, lamented: "Oh Rāma, what's the reason for all this misfortune? How wretched I am that my heart did not break and that I did not fall dead on hearing this heartrending news! There is no more place for peace and comfort in my life. Oh, is it on my account that this sad lot fell on you!" Then rushing up to the altar of her favourite goddess, she supplicated: "Mother goddess, won't you save my son? What harm have I done you that you should punish me and my son thus? Is this the way you reward me for praying to you day and night? I cannot live without Rāma near me. Please grant that I should die in your sacred presence just now."

Returning to Rāma, she said: "May the Divine Mother accept my supplication of self-immolation and save you all the time!" So saying she again fell prostrate before the sacred figure. Rāma's heart melted away with grief. There he saw his father in a semi-conscious state. Here again his mother seemed to take shelter in the arms of the god of Death. Oh what a plight! This could not all be a bad dream. It appeared to him that the very pillars supporting the edifice of Ikṣvāku race were crumbling down. He began to think of the future with helpless grief.

Lakṣmaṇa then tried to console Kausalyā with these words: "Mother, my brother Rāma is guilty of nothing. All this transpired from our father Daśaratha's weakness in his youth, when he promised Kaikeyī that her son would inherit the kingdom of Kosala. Now that the time has come for Rāma to be crowned, Kaikeyī sought from him the two boons he once offered her. You heard from Rāma what those two favours were. But I will not stand this nonsense. I cannot remain idle when the kingdom that rightfully belongs to Rāma is being snatched from him and when truth and justice are being trampled mercilessly. Give me leave to punish those responsible for this sad state of affairs and to set right matters."

Kausalyā now regained her wits. She is a woman whose loyalty to her lord and master Daśaratha was irrevocable. She could not bear to hear her husband thus insulted. She only wanted that Death should welcome her into his arms, now that she had to live away from her treasured child, Rāma. She regretted that the god of death would not accept her plea.

Hearing no reply from Kausalyā, Lakṣmaṇa turned to Rāma and said: "Revered brother, I cannot accept Kaikeyī's wish that you should go to the forest and that your younger brother Bharata should rule this kingdom. How dare the king dispatch you to the jungles while we are all prepared to celebrate your coronation? Who gave him this right? When the whole Ikṣvāku race is being thus insulted, this is no time for meek obedience. Just as you are bent on doing your duty according to your lights, so am I prepared to follow my heart's dictates. Right now you and Kausalyā will see how Lakṣmaṇa is going to lay down even his life in reparation for the injustice done to you. Let posterity sing of me that I served my elder brother even at the cost of my life. Let me now proceed on my mission of vengeance!"

While Kausalyā was pleased with Lakṣmaṇa's high regard for his elder brother, she could not bring herself to see him take his vengeance on her lord and master Daśaratha. As befitting a devoted Hindu wife, her concern was for her husband's safety, regardless of all other matters.

So she told Rāma: "Son, please consider Lakṣmaṇa's words. Is it fair that you should live in the forest, leaving us all in inconsolable distress? I have no one for Ayodhyā bereft of you. If you must go to the forest, take me also along with you. For, no mother seeks courtly comforts when her son is in unhappy exile."

Rāma heard the words of both of them with patience. He did not interrupt their outpourings, because he knew it was good for them not to suppress their agony but to speak out their minds. However, he must still gently make them understand the higher significance of a dutiful life. So he addressed his mother: "Mother, none must follow me. It is your first duty to look after your aged husband. Is it right that you should leave your wedded lord because of your doting love of your son?"

*Yāvat jīvati kākutsaḥ pitā me jagatīpatiḥ,
Śuśrūṣā kriyatā tāvat: sa hi dharmāḥ sanātanaḥ.*

It is my duty to obey my father's orders— whether or not they are just. Neither kingly pomp nor palatial comfort can give me the sort of satisfaction as the performance of my father's commands."

Seeing Kausalyā remain motionless, Rāma turned to Lakṣmaṇa and told him: “Brother, I am sorry I cannot agree with you. I know you are capable of punishing all those who come in the way of my coronation. But such a hasty action on your part can bring no glory to our race. After all, who are our enemies in this situation? It is our sacred duty to honour the wishes of our father, and it is reprehensible to flout them.”

As Lakṣmaṇa was still fuming and fretting, Rāma took him aside and started consoling him with soft words: “Lakṣmaṇa, even though our bodily entities are separate, you know our two hearts are united in one. I quite appreciate your anger. But, for the sake of Dharma, and to respect my word of honour, you must put up with your disappointment and learn forbearance and forgiveness:

*Dharmo hi paramo loke, dharme satyam pratiṣṭhītam;
Dharma samśritam etat ca pitur vacanam uttamam.*

If we ourselves break the edicts of Dharma, who else will honour them? If we go against the rule of law, the people too will break all laws, and our kingdom would fall into the hands of our enemies. You must understand that the fair name of our clan is more important and sacred than being crowned king. Let not our acts degrade our dynasty’s reputation. Besides, you must know that our father is not at all happy with his lot: he is only reluctantly fulfilling his promise to Kaikeyī.

*Satyah satyābhisandhaśca, nityam satyaparākramah,
Paralokabhayāt bhīto, nirbhayo’stu pitā mama.*

As he must keep his sacred word, let us not blame him. Let ■■ do our best to ensure his peace of mind. Till now the king caused us no discomfort. He is already suffering from his helplessness and is disconsolately grieving over what might befall us. Let me now gladly leave for the forest. If I further delay my departure, Kaikeyī would suspect me of foul play. It is only Providence that made her take this decision. For she had all along been loving me more than her own son. However, why must you grudge Bharata the rule of Kosala? Each one of us brothers is worthy of being crowned. Please also bear in mind that an inexorable Fate has been dictating all these events. Even ■■ the greatest of men had to obey the decrees of Fate, Kaikeyī too is helpless in its hands. Let us not

blame her any more. This is a testing time for you, I admit. But you must care for your good behaviour and reputation. Please don't indulge in any unnecessary heroics and let me proceed on my journey, after taking my leave of all the elders here. Kindly bring me the waters prepared for the coronation ceremony. I shall sanctify myself with them."

Then another thought crossed his mind. He must not touch the waters gathered for the coronation. It is now for Bharata to be bathed in them. So he changed his mind and told Lakṣmaṇa: "Dear brother, I am not the crown prince. I have lost the right to use those holy waters. Let me, instead, go and take a dip in the river Sarayū. I shall from there proceed to the jungle. I once again tell you all this is as God wills. There is no need to blame any mortal for this."

Just as the dew melts away at the touch of the morning sun's rays, Lakṣmaṇa's illusion was gone on hearing these wise words. He said: "Esteemed brother, you spoke as only a great man like you could. I now understand the truth of the whole matter. I do not deny that all this is the decree of Fate. I bear no illwill towards anyone. Still, is it manly to submit meekly to the cruel dictates of Destiny? I am convinced that it is a hero's duty to try his best to fight against the unjust laws of Fate and subdue it by virtue of his valour. Just see how I will enslave Fate with my might. I shall send to the forest those who want to send you there. Nay, I will even send them to the kingdom of Death. Let me also tell you that this is not the time for you to leave your aged parents. You must now look to their needs, accept your responsibility of ruling this land till you yourself grow old and transfer power to your children. This is the way our forefathers acted and you must follow their example."

Rāma tendered thanks to the benign Providence that granted him such a beloved brother. But as it was his bounden duty to obey his father, he tried to pacify Lakṣmaṇa with these words: "Dear brother, you know very well it is wrong to defy one's parents. If I now disobey our father what would the people, who look upon me as an ideal human being, think? They would naturally presume that I went against my father's wishes merely out of my greed for kingly power. So please don't be a party to the disrepute of our

clan. Please do not accuse the noble Bharata for his mother's faults. I know you have lost your sense of proportion owing to your extreme love for me. But still I must ask you not to say or do anything which will bring me dishonour. I do not value the kingship more than my filial duty. So if you have real regard for me, you must fall in with my wishes "

On hearing these words, Lakṣmaṇa was moved to tears. Rāma gently wiped them away with his fingers. At the touch of his divine brother's hand, Lakṣmaṇa's grief was gone.

Rāma then addressed Kausalyā: "Mother, have patience. These fourteen years will pass away like fourteen seconds if only we all patiently do our duties. After that period I will surely come back. So please don't stop now."

Kausalyā replied tearfully: "Son, is your father your only mentor? Have I not also the right to guide you and command you? How can you go to the jungle, leaving me in distress here? Please take me also with you if you must go. You do not seem to realize the agony of a mother. Else, you would not talk like this."

Rāma was touched to the quick. How can he drive away his mother's grief? On the one hand, he has his weak father and his cruel step-mother who want him to go into exile; on the other, he has his mother and his devoted subjects who cannot live in peace without him in their midst. However, torn as he was between these two loyalties, the innately sagacious Rāma did not lose his sense of the dutiful. Resolved to do his duty, he gently told Kausalyā: "Mother, our scriptures enjoin on the sons to obey their father's wishes. If we of this exemplary family defy the dictates of the Dharma Śāstras, who else will be there to protect the rule of the law? These clayish bodies of ours are transient. Must we besmirk the eternal law of Dharma for the sake of a mundane self-love? I surely cannot go against the dictates of my conscience which is nurtured on the teachings of Dharma. As for your wish to accompany you must understand that the King is caught in the snare of Kaikeyī's wiles and that this is the time for you to stand by him and attend to his needs. Therefore let me go and bless me."

Realizing that it was no use to argue further, Kausalyā replied: "Rāma, I will not come in your way. You cannot escape

your destiny. May all the gods in heaven bless you and keep you safe always!" So saying she uttered a mental prayer for his safety, and was once again overwhelmed with grief. Rāma, who received his mother's blessings, shone with added grace and took his leave of her and proceeded to his wife's living quarters to inform her of his decision.

Sītā was surprised to see Rāma coming to her without all the paraphernalia of the coronation ceremony. She also was intrigued to find a look of determination on his face. All that she needed from him was his love, and in her uneasiness at this strange sight of her lord and master she wanted to know what went wrong. Rāma said: "Once during the fight with Śambara, my father gave two boons to Kaikeyī. She now seeks them in the form of my exile and Bharata's coronation. I am now going to the forest for fourteen years at the behest of my father. I know you cannot live in peace without me. But still, I must ask you to attend to the needs of my elderly parents and to obey the orders of Bharata who will be the king. All my brothers are dear to me; so please look after them with affection. I understand your love for me; nevertheless, I must leave you for some time. Now set your mind at rest and give me leave to go to the forest right away."

Sītā was taken aback. She is the very incarnation of goddess Lakṣmī. For her Rāma is all. She who has to share her joy and grief with him, how can she bring herself to live without Rāma, to bear the thought of her husband's subsisting on fruits and roots in the Daṇḍaka jungle all by himself? She, who looks upon Rāma as her God, now remembered the parting advice of her father. Although she now grieved for Rāma, it is not the love of reigning over the kingdom of Kosala that concerned her much. It is the thought of parting from her husband that bothered her. All that she wanted was that she should be by his side through thick and thin, for her lord's presence alone is her heaven and her divine manifestation.

Rāma for his part was equally in love with her. But he could not entertain the idea of such a delicate, divine creature putting up with all the trials and tribulations of jungle life. So he thought it was better for her to serve his parents in the hour of their need. Although he cannot bear the idea of others' suffering on his account, he never minded his own troubles:

*Satyam dānam tapas tyāgam mitratā saucamārjavam;
Vidyā ca guruśuśrūṣā dhruvāṇi etāni rāghave.*

Then Sītā replied: "Lord, you yourself know all the Dharmas. So I do not have to tell you that a wife must share her husband's joy and grief. Your father's commands to you apply to me also. You are also a delicately brought-up person. I shall come with you. I shall remove the thorns in the way so that they will not prick you while you walk in the jungle. Please do not take me for a dunce. My parents ordered me to stick to you, no matter what befalls you. Just as you obey your parents, so too should I mine. Besides, my duty is to stay by your side all the time. Please do not think that I am arguing with you or disobeying you. My only wish is to be near you wherever you are. And then it has been my desire all along to see the natural beauties of the forest in your company. I do not like to live even in heaven without you beside me. We two living together can make even forest life worth living and conducive to the performance of our apportioned duties and the observance of sacred rites. I cannot live at all if you leave me behind. Please take me with you."

Seeing her plight, Rāma too was grief-stricken.

Sītā went on to supplicate: "Sir, the wild creatures of the forest cannot harm me, for at your very sight they would run away from us. And as long as I am by your side, cold and heat, hunger and thirst cannot affect me. Even supposing I would die there, such an end by your side would win for me a place in heaven. Besides, as soon as your feet touch the ground, even impassable tracts become flowery paths. Even otherwise, both of us are not slaves to the weaknesses of the senses, and so cannot be hurt by externally painful sensations. Above all, the astrologers in Mithilā once foretold that I would have to spend some time in a forest. Now their forecast is coming true."

Rāma's heart melted as he heard her words. Knowing full well that he has the ability to take care of Sītā and to fulfil her sincere wish, he replied: "Sītā, I promised your father that I would never break your heart. You are welcome to accompany me. Let us, before leaving, give away all our worldly possessions to the poor and the needy, the learned and the deserving."

Sītā was highly gratified.

Then Lakṣmaṇa, who was all the while waiting at the door, said: "Brother, is it fair on your part to leave me behind here? You know that all my life I have been by your side and cannot live in the city of Ayodhyā when you are not here."

Rāma hesitated to accept Lakṣmaṇa's plea, even though he knew that the latter could never in peace without his company, for he did not like the idea of leaving his parents uncared for in his absence.

Lakṣmaṇa was able to read Rāma's thoughts and proceeded to resolve his doubts: "Brother, you may rest assured that Kausalyā, the embodiment of service and mercy, would look after our father very well. As for myself, I have been given this body by the God only to use it in the service of Rāma and Sītā. To the best of my ability I will attend to your needs and gather all the fruits and roots for your food. So please take me along with you."

Rāma no longer hesitated, and all three now went up to King Daśaratha to receive his permission and blessings.

As Rāma, accompanied by Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, was walking in the street like a commoner, the people knew the reason. There was a great commotion among them. Saddened by the plight of their beloved prince, they began cursing the impotent king: "How could this cruel king, who was responsible for sending such delicately nurtured young people to the forest, deserve to rule us? However, this dutiful Rāma would not allow us to dethrone his father." So they thought it better that they too should follow Rāma into the jungle, for wherever Rāma is there they would find their dear Ayodhyā, their chosen land, their heaven on earth. Again they began to curse: "Let this wretched city of Ayodhyā, which does not enjoy the presence of Rāma in it, turn into an inferno. Let Kaikeyī and her son Bharata reign over such earthly hell. Let Ayodhyā become a jungle and the jungle that Rāma enters an Ayodhyā!"

Unable to return the sentiments of the people in a fitting manner, Rāma proceeded on his way with folded hands, as a sign of respectful acknowledgment of their love for him. Such was the mutual regard between the people and the prince, which during the eventual reign of Rāma accomplished such an ideal rela-

tionship between the ruler and the ruled as to win for it the eternal renown of Rāma Rājya, the ideal State.

As Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa approached Daśaratha's palace, they were greeted by Sumantra who was bowed down by sorrow. Rāma consoled him with gentle words: "Sumantra, please do not grieve, for none can check the march of destiny. Please inform the king that we have come to say goodbye to him."

Sumantra went up to the king. There he saw Daśaratha lying on the bare floor like a fallen tree. For ■ while no words came out of his lips. At last he pulled himself together and told the king about the visit of Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa.

Obtaining the king's permission, Sumantra took the young people inside. The three bowed to Daśaratha. The king stretched his arms to embrace Rāma, but even before he could touch his son he fell down in ■ swoon. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa lifted him up and placed him on his bed. After a while, when the king came to, Rāma said: "Sir, we have come to take our leave of you. In spite of my dissuading them strongly, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa are bent on following me to the forest. Kindly allow them to accompany me and bless us all three."

The tearful Daśaratha replied: "Rāma, I am helpless because I gave my sacred word to Kaikeyī. But you are not bound by any such promises. So dethrone me and take this kingdom of Kosala. None but you, not even Bharata, deserves to ascend this Ikṣvāku throne."

Rāma humbly replied: "Lord, my greatest wish is not to rule any kingdom, but to obey your just commands. You yourself are able to reign over this kingdom for several more years. Please do not make me depart from the path of righteousness but allow me to go to the forest. I shall spend the fourteen years in dutiful comfort and come back.

DAŚARATHA'S AGONY

The king addressed Rāma, the personification of Truth and Justice, thus: "Rāma, may the honour of our Ikṣvāku clan increase

by your example! May no harm come to you! Your mind is made up, and your decision is irrevocable. So, at least, spend this night in my presence. Let me feast my eyes on you for this one night; tomorrow you may proceed to the forest...Oh God, I never thought for a moment that Kaikeyī would be so heartless as to seek your exile. That is why I granted her those two favours. Anyway, you are such a devoted son that you are willing to suffer banishment to save my honour. There are very few people like you in this world. May you be always worthy of God's blessings! May your fame live for ever!"

Rāma said: "Lord, please send for Bharata rightaway. I do not at all regret that I could not be your heir. Kindly do not feel that you are in any way responsible for my troubles. Let not Bharata have any misgivings about me. As for my staying here overnight, a few more hours will not make any difference to the state of your mind. The longer I delay my departure, the greater will be your agony at parting. Soon after I leave you, you will be reconciled to our separation. Therefore permit me to take leave of you just now."

Daśaratha saw reason in Rāma's arguments, and accordingly ordered his minister: "Sumantra, send for all the bodyguards and the chariots and the charioteers. Rāma must be given a splendid farewell."

Oh! how unimaginative was the king! He was under the mistaken impression that Rāma was going to the forest as though for sporting and hunting. In his parental love he forgot that Rāma had to go like a hermit in accordance with Kaikeyī's wishes.

Kaikeyī was severely angered by the king's words and chided him with heartless sarcasm: "Well, well, how generous you are, sir! You are perhaps thinking of ceding all the wealth of Kosala to Rāma and leaving only a burial ground to Bharata. If you are really keen on sending all the people and the wealth of this kingdom away, along with Rāma, you might as well go back on your word and make Rāma your heir. For, what good would a denuded Kosala do to Bharata?"

The king was shocked. All the entourage of the palace abused Kaikeyī for her rudeness. Rāma for his part agreed to take with

him only such things as would be useful to ■ hermit like existence. Kaikeyī was much pleased with this.

Rāma told his father: "Lord, I have given up all valuables, along with the Ikṣvāku throne. I have no use for all these silken robes. All these belong to Bharata. During the coming fourteen years it is enough if I ■■ provided with ■ sackcloth for my apparel."

PUTTING ON THE SACKCLOTH

The unabashed Kaikeyī delightedly gave the sackcloths to Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. The royal young people there and then abandoned their rich garments and put on the hermit clothing. Sītā did not at first know how to cover herself with the sackcloth and complained to Rāma about her difficulty.

Sage Vasiṣṭha, who formerly presided over the pomp and ceremony of the wedding of the royal couple, Sītā and Rāma, was now saddened that he had to witness this scene. He reprimanded Kaikeyī and requested Sītā not to wear the sackcloth. And he chided the helplessness of Daśaratha. All this was due to the sage's extreme devotion to the royal family. Else, he would not have blamed Kaikeyī for it was not she who asked Sītā to go to the forest. It was the virtuous Sītā, whose deity is her husband, that wanted to accompany Rāma.

On his side, Daśaratha admonished Kaikeyī: "You cunning wretch, I did not promise to give Sītā's belongings to you. They were given to her by her father, and Rāma alone has the right to claim them. I just cannot stand the sight of Sītā's wearing a sackcloth. You are insulting Lakṣmi (Goddess of Wealth) in asking Sītā to do so. By this step you will be driving away all wealth and prosperity from this kingdom. Well now, may you and your Bharata wallow in the desert of poverty, death and misery!"

The noble Sītā cursed none for her lot and was actually delighted at the thought of being able to live by her husband's side all the time. And what need had she for silken robes when her Lord and master himself was getting rid of them?

Rāma took his final leave of his father: "Your majesty, my mother Kausalyā is very old. I am leaving her in your care. Her only care is that she should share both your joy and grief, and she bears no illwill to anyone. May the lord God grant that I could again see her safe, after completing my exile. That I should thus leave you uncared for in your old age is indeed the decree of Fate. Forgive me and give me your blessings."

All the three young people bowed to the feet of Daśaratha as ■ gesture of farewell.

As they were departing, Daśaratha began crying like a child. He was disconsolate because he wanted to enthrone Rāma and spend the rest of his life in Vānaprastha (life of retirement). He never thought his wishes would be thus thwarted. Well, that is the fate of man. Even death would not come to one as and when one wishes. Who can divine the mystery of man's birth and death? And how can Daśaratha or Kaikeyī escape the retribution that is their due, as ■ result of depriving Rāma of his birthright?

Daśaratha began to lament: "O God of Death, Yama, take me into your arms, for I have no more use for this wretched life of mine. Oh, won't you accept my request readily? If you feel that I should still more suffer on this earth for my misdeeds, let Kaikeyī also share the bad luck that I will have to suffer from. But take me away quickly, Lord Yama! I do not want to survive Rāma's departure from here." So crying, he fell into ■ swoon. Coming to, after ■ while, he ordered Sumantra to arrange a chariot to drop Sītā, Rāma Lakṣmaṇa near the borders of the forest.

Sumantra did ■■ he was ordered. Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were receiving the blessings of the elders. As Lakṣmaṇa was about to bend down to touch her feet, Sumitrā took her son into her arms. All that Lakṣmaṇa could say by way of farewell was to utter the one word, "Mother" Sumitrā herself is a woman of few words; but still she is ■ veritable genius. Besides possessing a strong will-power and a courageous disposition, she was also well-versed in statecraft. When everyone around her is in low spirits, she shines like a beacon of hope. She was quite aware of Rāma's divine heritage and therefore could console Kausalyā. And to her own offspring she had this piece of advice "Lakṣmaṇa, your most

sacred duty is to share your elder brother's burden. I am really gratified by your aliveness to this fact. Indeed Rāma is not only your elder, but also your teacher and your leader. You can do nothing better in your life than serving Rāma and Sītā, while they are in exile. So look upon Sītā as your mother and Rāma as your father while you are in the jungle, and take every care of them. And treat the Daṇḍaka forest itself as your own home-town of Ayodhyā:

*Rāmam daśaratham viddhi, mām viddhi janakātmajām,
Ayodhyām aṭavīm viddhi, gaccha tāta yathā sukham.*

I am sure you will all come back safe and sound. May God bless you!"

Sumantra requested the three to get into the chariot and offered his prayers to God that the fourteen years in exile should be like fourteen seconds to them with the help of His blessings.

DEPARTURE

Sītā gladly got into the chariot. Kausalyā gave her all the things she needed. The implements and weapons the exiles would need in the forest were placed in a corner of the chariot. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa also seated themselves in the chariot after taking leave of everyone who came to see them off. Sumantra slowly drove away the chariot. No eye was dry among those present at this departure. Even birds and animals seemed to shed tears, as their wails denoted. In fact it was the saddest scene in the life of Kosala.

Sumantra then hurried his horses and the chariot began to move with the speed of a swift breeze.

PEOPLE'S CRY

The populace was dejected at the sight of the flying chariot, for it was not satisfied with the leave-taking. The people cried: "Oh Sumantra, is it fair that you should thus rush away, taking our beloved Rāma away from us? Oh please let us take another look at that divine visage! And oh mother Sītā, wouldn't you take pity on

us and see that the chariot is stopped? Kindly look back at us! O Lakṣmaṇa, how lucky you are that you can stay with Rāma and Sītā all the time and serve them! But please note that you must bring them back to ■ unharmed, after the fourteen years. This is your duty. Remember that, though our bodies are here, our hearts are with you. Only when you all return will life and spirit come back to our hearts. Oh, what good is all the greatness of Ayodhyā to us in the absence of Rāma and Sītā? How heartless is Kaikeyī in sending away such beloved people like you! Oh, oh, we feel that even the soul of the whole kingdom is being driven away along with you. Oh, mother Sītā, you are indeed the guardian angel of our lives, you who have brought ever-increasing fame to both the clans of your father and your father-in-law. May the womankind of all ages sing your praises and follow your example! And, mother, please do not forget that we shall always be praying for your blessings."

Seeing the genuine grief of their beloved people, Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were very much moved. From above the terrace of Kaikeyī's castle Daśaratha was speechlessly gazing at the scene. As the chariot in its quick pace kicked up dust into the skies it became invisible after a while. The king felt that his own life-force was gone at that moment and that he became a living corpse. He swooned.

As to Rāma, he addressed Sumantra thus: "Sumantra, how touching is this love of the people for me! I can bear any amount of personal anguish and discomfort, but I seem unable to stand the sight of this afflicted populace. Certainly, as long ■ I live I will make it my life's mission to serve them to the best of my ability. I will come back after the period of my exile and take every care of them and repay their affection for me. Meanwhile, my brother Bharata, the sincerely dutiful Bharata, he must be crowned king and the people must obey him. No harm should come to him, and none of the descendants of our Ikṣāvaku race must be made ■ party to any kind 'of disgrace. This is my fervent wish."

Here Daśaratha regained consciousness after some time, and by sheer force of habit walked back to Kaikeyī's quarters like ■ automaton. At the same time Kaikeyī was coming out of her room in search of him. As soon as he saw her his anger and anguish

became once again uncontrollable. He said: "Woman, don't show me your face. Don't touch me. You have lost all the rights that belong to a wedded woman. I am now leaving you to your fate. If Bharata accedes to your wishes I forbid him from performing my last rites. And even if he should go against my wishes, I will not accept his oblations in the other world. Oh God, oh God, that things should come to this pass! Oh how can my darling son Rāma put up with all those inconveniences and ills of jungle life! How can he subsist on mere roots and fruits! Oh wretched Kaikeyī, how could you bring yourself to put him to such trouble? You will suffer for your sins. You will see that I will soon die and leave you in the desolation of long widowhood."

Slowly Daśaratha was losing his strength. All around he could only see the hated rooms of Kaikeyī, and the whole place appeared to him like a thorny bush. He thought he had no place there any more and ordered the servants to escort him to the palace of Kausalyā. He proceeded thither with faltering feet and laid himself down on a bed, awaiting his end. Some hours passed by thus. At midnight the king called Kausalyā and told her: "Queen, come here. Please give me your hand. By Rāma's going away, my eyesight also has gone. I suppose this is the punishment for the crime I have perpetrated against you and our son Rāma."

Kausalyā was bowed down with grief. How could she console her lord? She did her best to comfort him. Till now the king neglected her, the elder queen, and lavished his ardour on Kaikeyī. And though he had wronged her all these years, Kausalyā had no thought of mocking him for coming to her in his helpless old age, after spending all his prime years in the company of Kaikeyī. She was only sorry that she was indirectly responsible for the plight of her husband and their son. Really, the noble ladies of the world would never blame others, even though they themselves are blameless and the others are blameworthy.

The relentless wheel of time was moving on endlessly. The abode of luxury, where there always used to be some kind of celebration or other, has now become a home of darkness and distress. The king has lost all his attachment to the things of the world. He refused to take even a drop of water until he heard the news from Sumantra of Rāma's safe entry into the jungle. To him

even the mild breeze coming from the fanning by Kausalyā seemed to be a hot wind, and the queen herself appeared like a dead tree. Oh, when again would her life-tree put forth fresh blossoms? Her heart is so full of Rāma that in his absence from her sight it is indeed lifeless.

CONSOLATION

Learning about the hapless state of Kausalyā and Daśaratha, Sumitrā went over to them. She tried her best to comfort the wide-awake Kausalyā, who was fanning the insensate king, in these words: "Sister, you are well-versed in all the ancient texts. I do not have to tell you about our *Dharma* and our need to rise above the dualities of family life. But don't you think that you who should encourage others in this hour of agony are yourself weakening in your forbearance and patience? After all, you are quite aware that Rāma went into exile only to save the reputation of his father and his clan. There is nothing to grieve about in this fact. In fact, you should be proud of being the mother of a self-sacrificing hero like Rāma. Indeed he is the embodiment of all human and divine graces; he is capable of taking the rough with the smooth; besides, nothing untoward can ever happen to him, for even the hot sun becomes pleasant when it shines on him and the wildest wind calms down when it comes into contact with him. And then, my son Lakṣmaṇa is in constant attendance on him.

"Rāma is invincible in his own right; no enemy who attacks him can remain living afterwards. He will come back after a triumphant exile and console you more than ever.

"As for Bharata, you need not distrust him. He is the most dutiful of brothers. He will be true to the Ikṣvāku tradition in ruling the people during Rāma's exile.

"And so, have faith in every one of our beloved sons and in yourself. Please pull yourself together. This is no time for tears. It is incumbent on you to rise to the occasion and perform your duty. The king is in great distress; Bharata has not yet returned from his uncle's place. The kingdom is almost kingless at the moment.

"Get up and thank your God and yourself that you have such a glorious son as Rāma. Cheer up all the people of Ayodhyā and

the inmates of the palace by your brave example. You are the mother of a matchless hero. Always bear that fact in mind and rejoice."

Hearing these wise words of the gentle Sumitrā, Kausalyā regretted her momentary weakness and regained her peace of mind.

PLEA

The common people of Ayodhyā were still unreconciled to the parting from Rāma. They were still trying to stop Rāma's chariot. They wailed aloud: "Oh Rāma, please take us also along with you, or else come back right now and rule us. We cannot live without you."

Then Rāma ordered his chariot to be stopped, and addressed the crowd that was running after it thus: "Beloved citizens, you all know I am going to the forest to obey my father's command. There can be no greater duty for a man than to perform his parent's orders. Is it right that you should stop me from doing this sacred duty of mine? In fact this is the occasion for you to encourage me to go to the forest in accordance with my father's wishes.

"I know all about your love for me. I now request you to show the same regard for Bharata who will be your king during my absence. Even though he is young in age he is ripe in his wisdom. He has every trait which will please you. He is a lovable man. So promise me your allegiance to him and, by doing so, fulfil my sincere wish.

"And also think of the old king Daśaratha, who is already much aggrieved. Do nothing which will cause him further distress. I now beg of you to go back to your respective homes and go about your daily chores in a spirit of renewed dedication."

Hearing Rāma's words redoubled the people's regard for him. They bowed to Rāma, Sitā and Lakṣmaṇa and agreed to return home.

Sumantra then drove away the chariot. After going a little distance the cries of learned Brahmins were heard: "Oh white

steeds, are you taking away our beloved Rāma? Oh please stop! Oh please bring back our Rāma to us just now, for we cannot live without him! Oh, horses, can't you hear us! Is it not said the steeds like you have the power of hearing human voices? Is this popular view wrong? Then, why don't you stop?"

Moved by their agonising plea, Rāma asked Sumantra to stop the chariot. Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa got down and proceeded towards the noble Brahmins. The pundits surrounded the three young people and requested them to return to Ayodhyā. Rāma begged of them not to stand in the way of his doing his duty. They were at last persuaded to go back.

Even river Tamasā seemed to come in Rāma's way and prevent his going into the jungle. And yet, Rāma would not budge from his resolution.

On the river bank Sumantra stopped the chariot, and unbridled the horses to enable them to drink the waters and feed themselves in the nearby meadow.

Then Rāma told Lakṣmaṇa: "Brother, this is our first night in the forest. We shall spend this night on the banks of this holy Tamasā river. We are no strangers to the forests. Look at those majestic trees and those innocent birds and cattle. Don't you feel they too are expressing their mute sympathy for us? But let us not be unduly regretful about any thing. For, Bharata is a honest and dutiful man. He will do his duty by his parents and his people properly."

Calling Sumantra, Rāma said: "Please take care of the horses." King Daśaratha is very fond of those steeds. That is why Rāma looked on them with great respect. Indeed those white horses are no ordinary animals. They were actually shedding tears because they could not participate in Rāma's coronation but were fated to take him to his exile.

After finishing their ablutions, Rāma told Lakṣmaṇa: "Dear brother, it is right that we should fast on this first night in our exile and meditate on Lord Viṣṇu."

Lakṣmaṇa prepared a grassy bed for Rāma and Sītā. He himself remained awake, talking to Sumantra.

Oh, how cruel are the decrees of fate! That Rāma and Sītā who were used to sleeping on silken mattresses in rich palaces should now lay themselves down on the bare ground! However, the divine couple were aware of the dualities of joy and grief, pleasure and pain, in the worldly life, and, unlike the common people, took their lot in their stride.

Early next morning Rāma observed: "Sumantra, look at all these good people who followed us on bare feet and now are fast asleep in their tiredness. I am deeply touched by their love and affection. Nonetheless, I cannot accede to their wish of seeing me back in Ayodhyā right now. So before they wake up we must make a move; otherwise there will be again so much fuss."

Sumantra gently manoeuvred the chariot. On the south bank Rāma told Sumantra: "Now take back the chariot to the other side and drive for a while along the road to Ayodhyā, and then return to this bank. That way the people would get the impression that you drove us back to Ayodhyā while they were asleep. Poor people. Already they are so tired, and they will have to take greater pains in getting back home. Please do as I say rightaway."

Sumantra did as he was told. As soon as the chariot returned, the three royal personages ascended it and proceeded southwards.

Here on the banks of Tamasā the people awoke and found no trace of the chariot, the charioteer and the royal passengers. As they followed the tracks of the chariot they saw that they led back to Ayodhyā. They were not aware of the fact that Rāma would have asked them to accompany him if he really returned to Ayodhyā, but still they were not certain about the whereabouts of Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa. Cursing the heartlessness of Kaikeyī, and lamenting the sight of Ayodhyā bereft of Rāma, they returned to their homes.

After crossing the river Tamasā, Sumantra took his passengers a long way inside the forest. Crossing more rivers and meadows they reached the outer limits of the Kosala kingdom. Then Rāma said: "Sumantra, now I would like to hunt in these forests beyond river Sarayū. What is your advice regarding my wish? Is it right that I should now take to hunting?"

Sumantra replied that it was within limits, permissible for kings to hunt wild animals. Else they would be a source of danger to the hermits and the cattle in the hermitages of the forest.

Then Rāma turned towards the city of Ayodhyā and addressed it on bended knees: "O great capital of Ikṣvāku dynasty, now permit us to take leave of your sight. We will come back and touch your sacred ground on completing our years of exile. In the meantime let nothing untoward happen to your fair name. May all your inhabitants live in peace and prosperity. You have, through the ages, been the citadel of our solar race's fortune. Please do not forget us who will always be grateful to you."

Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa and Sumantra also bowed to the presiding deity of the Kosala kingdom. They were all moved to tears.

It was only a short time after Sītā arrived in Ayodhyā from Mithilā. She did not have a real chance of serving her parents-in-law during this period. However, she looked upon Ayodhyā with the same love as she had for her home-town, Mithilā. So she was sad to leave that great town of Ayodhyā. And yet, how could she think of living in Ayodhyā when her husband was away? Nor could she bear the thought of her leaving those beloved denizens of Ayodhyā who had so much regard for her that they could help her not to miss her dear father Janaka. She dropped a couple of tears for her helplessness and for the forlorn state of Ayodhyā devoid of Rāma's presence.

Sumantra took them to the banks of Gaṅgā in his chariot. That river was flowing in all her majesty and true to her hallowed birth. As soon as the royal exiles saw that heavenly stream their hearts were filled with joy. The splendour of natural beauty on both sides of the river was really indescribable. All those fertile fields, those flowery gardens, those fruitful farms, those singing birds—they were a sight for the gods. They all appeared to be smiling welcomingly, as they saw Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa—as though they were grateful for their arrival in their midst. They seemed to be eager to play host to the three blessed people.

Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa chose a beautiful spot to rest for the night. The horses were released to graze in the lush green. The

gentle breezes coming from Gaṅgā drove away their travel weariness.

FRIENDSHIP WITH GUHA

The news of Śrī Rāma's arrival was brought to the king of the forest tribes, Guha. Guha had high regard for the kingdom of Kosala, for all the kings of Ikṣvāku race and specially for Rāma. Therefore he eagerly went forward, along with his family and friends, to greet Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa. Hearing the welcoming cries of the party, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa understood that Guha and his people were coming towards them, and they themselves proceeded to meet the tribesmen. Such indeed is the affection of Rāma for his devotees, that he does not discriminate even against the lowliest of the lowly.

The enraptured Guha stretched out his arms, and, rushing forward, embraced Rāma. Rāma realizes full well the intensity of his devotee's feelings, and in Guha's heart Rāma has been wholly pervasive. So much so that in that embrace of the devotee and the incarnation of God, there was evident that supreme joy which comes of the union of the individual self with the Universal Self.

For ■ man who has been for years longing for a glimpse of Rāma, the arrival of the great prince at his own place was ■ matter of extreme gratification. And how lucky are all those people residing on the banks of Gaṅgā to be able to see with their worldly vision the Supreme Rāma!

Guha was at his wits' end to arrange a suitable reception to Rāma. But, of course, like ■ father who looks for nothing more than simple love from his children, all that God requires from his devotees is simple devotion. Even a drop of water offered in devotion is enough for the Lord.

Taking a tumblerful of the sacred Gaṅgā waters, Guha thrice washed Rāma's feet and pressed them reverentially to his eyes. How blessed are the hands of Guha that could touch the feet of Rāma! Indeed only two people had the great good fortune of enjoying Rāma's closest embrace. One is, of course, Sītā; the other now is Guha.

HOSPITALITY

*Svāgatam te mahābāho taveyam akhilā mahi,
Vayam preṣyā bhavān bhartā sādhu rājyam praśādhi naḥ,*

Guha addressed Rāma reverentially: "Lord, your arrival is a source of immense joy for us. Please treat this humble kingdom of mine as your own. Just as Ayodhyā is yours, so is this area. There is not much to boast of in giving you a bit of your own in thus offering you our hospitality. In receiving a guest like you my whole life has attained a new significance and I am assured of Beatitude. Kindly accept our humble fare."

Then offering some tasteful dishes, he said: "Lord Rāma, you know that this is like your own home. It is our earnest wish that you should spend all the fourteen years of your exile here. Every comfort will be provided to you, and we have no greater joy in life than that of serving you to the best of our ability. This is our ardent prayer, and if you refuse to grant me this favour let me end my wretched life at your feet here and now."

Rāma of course subordinates his personal comfort to the needs and wishes of his devotees. But, how can he bring himself to acquiesce in Guha's wish? His prime allegiance is to his father. Still, he did not like to wound the feelings of this sincere devotee. He gently replied: "Dear Guha, I am highly gratified by your hospitality and devotedness. Your affection for me is matchless. Although your wish is as genuinely admirable as your hospitality, you have to note that I am bound by certain irrevocable promises. I have come here to spend fourteen years like a hermit, not to enjoy rich hospitality and royal comforts like those which you now so graciously offer me. Tomorrow we shall take our leave of you. Kindly give good nourishment to these steeds which are the pets of King Daśaratha. I assure you that you have a special place in my heart."

Guha was not quite consoled. But he realized that it is impossible to divert Rāma from the path of his chosen duty.

That night a soft bed of green leaves was made for Rāma and Sītā. Lakṣmaṇa and Sumantra kept Guha company, and they were all keeping watch over the divine couple.

Guha told Lakṣmaṇa: "You are very tired. A bed has been arranged for you. Please take rest. My followers and I will watch over you, Rāma and Sītā. You may rest assured no harm will come to any of you in this part of the forest under my domain."

Lakṣmaṇa replied: "Dear Guha, we are grateful to you for your kind hospitality and kind words. But how can I bring myself to sleep? Just look at that beloved daughter of the great king Janaka lying down on the bare ground. And that best of men, Rāma, who should in all conscience be ruling over the three worlds, is now destined to sleep in such open meadows. When I am fated to see such a pitiful sight, how can I sleep? Besides, the citizens of Ayōdhyā, and my mother Sumitrā, enjoined on me the responsibility of taking constant care of Rāma and Sītā. So till the two return to Ayodhyā safely, I swore to myself that I would sleeplessly watch over them. Of course I have implicit faith in you. It is just that I must not relinquish my sworn duty even for a second and even in the most favourable circumstances. And, dear friend, let me tell you how worried I am about the fate of my parents, who must be pining for us. Old Daśaratha must have by now breathed his last, in his extreme distress caused by our separation. If he died, Kausalyā and Sumitrā must have joined him on the funeral pyre, as befitting loyal wives. Oh God, we do not even have the luck to perform the last rites for our parents, in case they die before we return home. Oh what misdeed of ours in past birth, brought us to this pass!"

Guha appreciated Lakṣmaṇa's agony. His eyes were wet. He had nothing to say in reply. He was, however, delighted with Lakṣmaṇa's sense of duty. Guha's devotion to Daśaratha and his progeny is so great that it can withstand any test.

Waking early next morning, Rāma told Lakṣmaṇa: "Brother, didn't you take any rest overnight? Why is it you look so careworn and tired? Don't you know that God always takes care of us? Anyway, now ask Guha to arrange a boat for us to cross Gaṅgā."

As for Sītā, during the night she dreamt about the incidents in her past life. As soon as she saw King Janaka her eyes were filled with tears of ecstasy. But she saw him shedding tears on her account. Then Sītā told him not to worry because of her, for, as

long as she is beside Rāma, she is sure to be happy. In her dream Sītā also saw her old playmates crying for her. She knew not how to console them. Her parents-in-law also appeared in her vision. Sītā respectfully bowed to those sad-looking figures. Then she saw the denizens of Ayodhyā woefully asking her whether it was fair to leave them behind. The innocuous Sītā also knew not what words of comfort to say to them. So she turned to Rāma, and he comforted them. All this was but a dream. On waking up Sītā saw Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa getting ready for the onward journey. Guha was making all the arrangements for crossing Gaṅgā.

The tearful Sumantra bowed to Rāma and was awaiting his orders. Patting Sumantra on the back, in order to console him, Rāma said: "Sumantra, you must know it is of no use to lament. Who can fight against the decrees of Fate? I know you are grieving for me. But you have more useful things to do to help me and save the reputation of our dynasty. Please go back to Ayodhyā quickly and reassure our parents that we are well settled in the jungle. If you delay, Kaikeyī might presume that we didn't go to the forest, and, consequently, blame Daśaratha. And please take good care of him, for you alone are capable of doing so."

Still, Sumantra's grief did not subside. Sobbingly, he replied: "Rāma, what is the use of righteousness, honesty and wisdom in this cruel world? If people like you are banished into the forest, how can we who depend on you live in comfort? Would you neglect the good of your dependants because of Kaikeyī's cruelty? Please depute someone else to look after Daśaratha and let me stay with you."

Rāma replied: "Sumantra, Daśaratha has faith in you alone, because you have all along been faithful to him and to our entire family through thick and thin. So don't let go this opportunity of living up to your reputation. And tell him not to grieve for us because the all-merciful Lord will always be looking after us. Please convey our respectful regards to our parents. Please assure Kaikeyī that we bear no grudge against her and that it is pleasing to us that Bharata should be crowned king. So may the Lord God bless Bharata and help him to serve his father and his people! May his fame last for ever and spread everywhere! May God bless him!"

Still crying like a child, Sumantra said: "How can I go back to Ayodhyā without Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa in my chariot?"

Rāma said: "Well, Sumantra, this is the time for you to remember all your philosophy and bear all difficulties with fortitude. Now, please go back and live up to all your manly ideals."

Then Sumantra took his leave of Rāma. Casting ■ lingering look on the exiles departing further into the forest, he lamented: "O goddesses of the forest! Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are now seeking refuge in your midst. Please befriend them; return them safely to us after fourteen years."

After a while he could not see Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa any more. He was broken-hearted. Slowly driving back to Ayodhyā, he lost all hope of remaining alive by the time they would return from exile.

Guha was following the royal exiles. It was now his incidental task to ferry them across Gaṅgā. Well, he was only an instrument; for Rāma is himself the incarnation of God who can ferry all creatures across the ocean of quotidian life. All this is the play of God.

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa smeared their hair with the juice of banyan leaves. Their tender locks have formed into hard knots. Seeing Rāma's matted hair, Lakṣmaṇa's heart was pierced with grief. Rāma consoled him. Sītā closed her eyes for a while. Before her mental eye appeared the handsome, brave Rāma she saw at the time of his breaking Śiva's bow; her whole being felt a pleasurable thrill. On opening her eyes she saw Guha in their presence. Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa followed him to the banks of Gaṅgā. They all saluted the sacred river. Rāma prayed: "Mother Gaṅgā, by taking a dip in you even a sinner becomes ■ saint. Forgive us our sins. If a mother would not pardon her children's mistakes, who else would? Please look after ■■ with tender care all these fourteen years. It is your responsibility to send ■■ back home safe and sound. Here are my salutations, mother."

On seeing the river, Sita was reminded of her father. She said: "Gaṅgā, I do not know who my mother is; I only know that my

foster-father is Janaka. Now I am away from him. You alone are now my father and my mother in one. So bless me. On returning from my exile I shall offer you flowers and fruits, and in your name donate food and clothes to the deserving learned people and the poor and needy. Mother, please do not forget us." So saying, she again bowed to the river.

Then it appeared as though the personified Gaṅgā took her into her arms, comforted and blessed her. Indeed, the holy river, who sanctifies those that come into contact with her, herself felt sanctified by the touch of the divine couple, Sītā and Rāma. She seemed to say that she would eagerly await their safe return.

CROSSING THE GANGĀ RIVER

Guha ordered his boatmen to get the ferry ready. The boat began to sail across the river with Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa as her passengers.

The boat was slowly crossing the river. Eventhough she is ■■■ inanimate thing, by the touch of Rāma she seemed to have come to life. How fortunate she is! She was moving and rolling like ■ royal swan—conscious of her noble deed in ferrying across the divine people. For her part the river again felt doubly gratified and tenderly touched the feet of Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa as they left the boat on the other side.

Rāma and Guha bade each other ■ tearful farewell.

Getting out of the boat and landing, the three looked around and found the place all uninhabited. As they were about to enter the jungle, Rāma told Lakṣmaṇa: "Brother, we are now about to step into the most fearful forest in the world. So you proceed first; Sītā will follow you and I will bring up the rear. Sītā, who has ■■■ now never experienced even the least little discomfort in her life, has ■■■ to put up with so many troubles. And you are also obliged to share my burden of looking after her. Anyway, it is not yet too late. Please go back to Ayodhyā, and we two will somehow spend the years of exile."

The saddened Lakṣmaṇa replied: "Sir, neither kingdom nor parents equal you in importance. Please forgive ■■■ and bear with

me. I cannot live without you, any more than can I bear to take ■ look at that heartless Kaikeyī by returning to Ayodhyā. Here I will bring you all your nourishment and will serve you in every other way. This is the best way to my salvation. While you live in the forest, I cannot even dream of living in the palace. I would rather die at your feet than go back. Please do not test me any further.”

Rāma was always aware of Lakṣmaṇa’s brotherly love and devotion. So he fell in with his wishes. However, he regretted that he himself lost a chance of serving his parents ■ Lakṣmaṇa is now serving him.

The divine incarnation, Sri Rāma, is grieving like an ordinary mortal. This is ■ significant fact in the story of *Rāmāyaṇa*. If the Almighty performed every human act with his omnipotent powers, then there would be no play between Good and Evil, which alone causes triumph or tragedy in human existence. Therefore he had to assume a human dimension in order to establish the rule of law, the dominance of *Dharma*. This in fact is the secret of Rāma’s *humanness* and his struggle for the establishment of *Dharma*.

RĀMA’S DISENCHANTMENT

Rāma said to Lakṣmaṇa: “Brother, it would appear that mankind attaches greater importance to *Artha* (wealth) and *Kāma* (Desire) than to *Dharma* (Dutiful righteousness). We of the kingly race, what sort of credence have we given to people’s opinion in matters of State? They have agreed to obey our commands, because of their confidence in us. Isn’t this really dictatorship?

“Well, I myself am to blame for my bad luck. I myself must bear all my trials and tribulations without making the people suffer ■ my account. They of course have placed great trust in me and ■ hoping for great things from me. All their expectations are ■ gone like dew in the morning sun. How could we show our face to them after fourteen years of their disappointment?”

Lakṣmaṇa was much moved by these words. But how could he console the great Rāma? Who can put out the fiery lava bursting forth from a volcano? After some serious thought he said: “Revered brother, is it right that you, who should encourage us,

become discouraged? You are the ideal and the idol of all humanity. Your **■■■■** and fame must flourish till eternity. If you yourself lose faith and courage, it would lead to many ills."

These words have put into Rāma the strength of a thousand elephants. He wondered at his own former mental weakness. He admired Lakṣmaṇa's **■■■■** of duty, and his sagacity and timely advice. As he glanced at Sītā, she replied with **■** understandingly tender smile. They rested for that night in the valley, after roaming about the forest like fearless lions.

ENTERING THE HERMITAGE

Early next morning they entered the precincts of the *Āshram* of Bharadvāja near Prayāga. As they were approaching the hermitage, they could see from **■** distance the smoke emanating from the sacrificial fire. "Ah, there you see the Bharadvāja Āshram!", said Rāma.

Prayāga is a place of holy pilgrimage. It is also popularly known as "Trivenī Sangam", because here the three rivers Gaṅgā, Yamunā and Sarasvatī (in a hidden form) join in a confluence. Here it is that the ashes of the dead are immersed. Thereby the departed souls are freed from the cycle of birth and rebirth. Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa were extremely delighted at visiting such a sacred place.

Here sage Bharadvāja was offering his sacrificial prayers. The royal exiles were also gratified at the chance of seeing such a great sage while he was doing his ritual penance. They saluted him reverentially. The sage knew who they were by virtue of his clairvoyance, and joyfully welcomed them. Offering them fruits and other nourishment, and narrating several moral-bearing tales, he pressed them to stay at his hermitage for all the fourteen years. Rāma thanked him for his kind hospitality and for his generous offer, but regretted his inability to accept it, because the place **■■■** too crowded to give peace of mind to Sītā. So he asked the sage to point out to them a quieter place for their stay. The sage thought that Rāma's request was proper, and suggested to him that the **■■■** surrounding mount Citrakūṭa, which was about fifty kilometres away, would be **■** ideal site for their camping. Resting

at Bharadvāja's hermitage for the night, Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa took their leave of the sage, who found it hard to bid farewell to them.

The three exiles crossed the river Yāmūnā and stopped under ■ banyan tree, which was described by Bharadvāja ■ 'Śyāma'. It is popularly said that by bowing to it one could accomplish all desired ends. Rāma prayed to the tree and expressed his wish that his exile should come to ■ fruitful conclusion and that he should go back to Ayodhyā and rule the people with justice and fair play. Sītā prayed that her consort's wishes might bear fruit and that he should all the time be loving to her. Lakṣmaṇa also bowed to the tree and wished that his brother's prayers would be favourably answered; for his part his greatest wish was to be able to serve Rāma and Sītā uncomplainingly and steadfastly all through his life.

Looking at these worthy people, the tree, Śyāma, was greatly moved. From its leaves some sacred drops of water fell down. How fortunate was that tree which could give shelter to such great personages!

Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa proceeded to the mount Citrakūṭa. Ah, there is that lovely mountain! With several lakes full of lilies and lotuses, trees yielding rich fruits, creepers flourishing with beautiful flowers, surrounding the mount, the whole scene was a sight for the gods. It was indeed ■ abode of peace, a repository of plenty, a heaven on earth.

Seeing the prince-charming, Rāma, the peacocks of the place began dancing in their full plumage. The limpid streams were flowing with renewed force through the valleys. The butterflies were sucking the honeyed flowers with an intensity which caused them stupor.

Rāma was highly pleased with the surroundings; Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa agreed with him that it was quite habitable. At Rāma's bidding, Lakṣmaṇa, built a cottage on ■ high mound nearby.

COTTAGE

Rāma admired the skill with which his brother built the cottage. There were four rooms in it. One was a kitchen; the

second ■ bathroom; the third ■ sanctum in which Rāma could offer his prayers; the fourth ■ bedroom for Rāma and Sītā. Lakṣmaṇa himself lived in the porch in front of the cottage.

In that lovely citadel of all natural splendour, the westerly breezes were bringing them the smell of sweet jasmines and other flowers. The *koels* and other singing birds would herald each new dawn. The deer and other fauna would provide all the sport the exiles liked to witness. Thus mount Citrakūṭa was like a heavenly resort to the exiles.

Rāma told Lakṣmaṇa: "Brother, Sītā's feet are ■ tender as eiderdown. By her treading the ground here, it seems to have become soft. And what surpassing skill is at your fingertips! How could you make this cottage so habitable in such ■ short time? Even exile becomes a holiday living in such a place. One might say that in the veil of troubles are hidden some pleasures too!"

At an auspicious moment the three entered the cottage in accordance with the Vedic practice. Sītā was mightily pleased that her dear husband now would be with her all the time. Unlike in Mithilā and Ayodhyā, here there is no din and bustle of court life to distract his attention. Lakṣmaṇa alone is with them, serving them food and drink. The cottage is on the banks of river Mālyavati. Thus everything is conducive to their physical and mental well-being.

Mount Citrakūṭa is in its every aspect an abode of all that is uniquely, holy and lovely—as its very name signifies. To be the place of resort for the divine incarnation is unique; to provide peace and plenty for the divine couple is unique; to receive the love and affection of Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa is unique; to possess the best and the brightest treasures of nature is unique. The personified Citrakūṭa thought: "How fortunate I am! I never dreamt I would be able to play host to such a guest as Rāma. I am grateful to Kaikeyī who indirectly provided me with this opportunity. Surely I will see to it that nothing untoward happens to Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa ■ long as they remain here. I fee my whole being sanctified with the touch of the dust of the feet of Rāma and Sītā. I am grateful to the merciful Providence which gave ■■ this chance, thereby making my name live as long ■ the story of Rāmāvana does."

Sumantra, along with Guha, spent four days in the city of Śrīgibera on his way back to Ayodhyā. Learning from messengers that Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are safely settled on mount Citrakūṭa, he was much consoled.

At last he was on the last leg of his journey back home. Even the chariot steeds seemed to feel sorry that they had to leave Sītā and Rāma behind. The chariot itself looked forlorn. Oh, when will the day again dawn when Rāma and Sītā will be seated in it!

As the chariot returned to Ayodhyā, the citizens surrounded it, anxiously inquiring after Sītā and Rāma. Sumantra told them: "O honourable citizens of Ayodhyā, accept the thanks of Rāma and Sītā through me. They are hale and hearty on mount Citrakūṭa. It is Rāma's wish that you should all obey Bharata. He promised to come back here after the scheduled period. Kindly retire to your homes peacefully."

The tearful crowd made way for the chariot to pass along the main street.

With bowed head, Sumantra was himself shedding tears; even the white steeds seemed to be crying. At last the chariot reached the palace of Kausalyā.

All the former splendour of Ayodhyā now seemed to have gone. In fact Ayodhyā without Sītā is like paradise without goddess Lakṣmī, the consort of Lord Viṣṇu.

The news of Sumantra's arrival was conveyed to Kausalyā. Her entourage came out to learn the news of Rāma and Sītā. Sumantra assured them about the divine couple's safety. They led him to Kausalyā who was attending on Daśaratha in her room.

As soon as Sumantra came into the room, Kausalyā asked him: "Sumantra, where did you leave my Rāma? Are Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa safe? I have been anxiously awaiting your return. Please tell me all the news." Sumantra replied: "Mother, they are now happily staying on mount Citrakūṭa. It is a veritable heaven on earth. They are actually grateful to Kaikeyī for being responsible for their sojourn in such a lovely place. They promised

to come back to you all, after fourteen years. I wanted to be with them. But Rāma dissuaded me, asking me to serve Daśaratha here."

Hearing all this news, Daśaratha could express only two words: Rāma, Rāma!". Sumantra told him: "Your Majesty, Rāma asked me to convey to you his salutations. It is his wish that Kaikeyī must not be insulted and that Bharata should be crowned in his place. He wanted me to tell Kausalyā that it is not age but power that makes kings great. He hoped that Bharata would treat Kausalyā like his own mother. But Lakṣmaṇa swears his allegiance to Rāma and to none else. Sītā could not articulate her message, except to look at Rāma with tearful eyes."

Kausalyā's heart was weighed down with sorrow. She told Daśaratha: "Lord, you sent away Rāma to the jungles to please Kaikeyī. There is no point in grieving now for what you yourself did. Oh, sir, while my Rāma and Sītā are spending their young lives in exile how can I live in comfort in these palaces? Rāma asked me to remain here to serve you. But I do not know how I can long lead this wretched life, separated from my beloved son. So let me die. There is nothing happier for a Hindu woman than to predecease her husband. You may spend your time happily with Kaikeyī and Bharata. Even after his return from exile, Rāma will not covet the throne. I have no hope of seeing my Rāma again. So let me die like a Sumahgaṇī."

Daśaratha understood Kausalyā's suffering, but he was helpless. He said: "Dear queen, Kaikeyī will never be the reigning queen. Nor will Bharata be the ruling king. We are all paying for my unknowing sin in killing the sage's son. I myself have no wish to live. I dare not face Rāma again. But, of course, I am glad and proud that in order to obey his father's command my son Rāma relinquished his right to the throne, without a murmur; that I have a daughter-in-law who was prepared to share her husband's lot in all circumstances; and that my younger son Lakṣmaṇa dedicated his life to the service of Rāma and Sītā. I need not tell you how happy I am, too, to have such good wives like you and Sumitra. I do not think I will live to see Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa again. Let me for the last time take my leave of you. Forgive me for the distress I caused you. My heart is breaking for my misdeed. My

sight is weakening. My energy is ebbing. Ah, there! I see the God of Death welcoming me. I can see those old hermit couple and their martyred son. Yama's messengers are going to lasso me and lead me to the other world. Oh, there I see Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa! Rāma, pardon me. Why are you shedding tears for me? I do not deserve your grief, for I only gave you troubles. Allow me to cast off this wretched mortal coil of mine. This is my final wish. Take my last blessings."

Kausalyā realized that Daśaratha's end was nearing. She fell at his feet and begged his pardon.

Sumitrā ordered Sumantra to make the arrangements for Bharata's coronation.

Three-fourths of the night was gone. Kausalyā and Sumitra were at Daśaratha's side. At last they dozed off.

Gently Daśaratha cried twice, "Rāma, Rāma!". None could hear him, though. Since he died with the name of Rāma, the incarnation of God, on his lips the messengers of Hell ran away from him. Instead, the servants of Lord Viṣṇu took him to Heaven. And by virtue of his utterance of the sacred name, ■ spark of his spirit entered the soul of Śrī Rāma.

BAD DREAM

At the very moment of Daśaratha's death Rāma had ■ bad dream in his sleep. He felt that a spark from Daśaratha's body entered his being. When he conveyed his knowledge to Sītā, she wept. Lakṣmaṇa was also informed and they all cried together.

The heralds arrived at dawn at Kausalyā's palace to wake the King ■ usual. But they saw him dead. They conveyed the sad news to Sumitrā first. She is ■ realized soul. But being a wife, she was naturally heart-broken. She was all the more sad that the King's death occurred in the absence of his children. She was wondering how severely shocked Kausalyā would be when she learnt the news of his death.

Slowly the news of the calamity spread all over the city of Ayodhyā. The ministers, feudal lords and the populace came out

in their thousands to condole Kausalyā and Sumitrā. They all abused Kaikeyī. They praised Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. They were uneasy about the future fate of their kingdom.

Learning the news, Kausalyā rushed to her husband. Falling at his feet, she lamented: "O Yama, lord of death, take me along with my husband, for I have no use for this life without my husband and away from my beloved son Rāma."

Kausalyā's maids lifted her to her bed and were fanning her.

Sumitrā was awaiting the return of Bharata from his uncle's place.

Kaikeyī never thought that her action would lead to her husband's death. She really wished that Bharata's coronation would take place while Daśaratha was alive. She now personally heard the abuse of the people. She realized that they were even prepared to revolt against her and her son. However, she had implicit faith in Rāma and knew that the people would not go against his wish that Bharata should be obeyed like himself. Thus she who should have wept for her deceased husband was on the contrary thinking and dreaming of the coming splendour she would enjoy when her son would rule the kingdom.

Vasiṣṭha and other priests and sages also lamented the death of Daśaratha. They had always been hoping and praying for the safety of the king, for he was not merely ■ ruler but also a great scholar, a valiant fighter, a performer of sacrificial rites, a champion of *Dharma* in its entirety, a man as rich as the god of wealth, Kubera and ■ protector of the common people. Such a great man was now fated to die in the absence of his sons, and had a wife, Kaikeyī, who actually did not sympathise with him even in his death. His sons were not present to perform the last rites of Daśaratha. His trusted and revered elder wives, Kausalyā and Sumitrā, were immersed in sorrow. Oh, how inescapable are the decrees of retribution!

The city of Ayodhyā wore ■ forlorn look. With the absence of even Bharata and Śatrughna, the people were afraid of possible anarchy.

Even the sun-god seemed to express his sympathy for the people of this kingless kingdom, as he crossed the sky hidden by clouds.

Then several sages like Vāmadeva, Kaśyapa, Kātyāyana, Gautama and Jābāli, and ministers like Sumantra and Siddhārtha, approached Vasiṣṭha and told him: "Revered sir, the king is dead. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are at Citrakūṭa. Bharata and Śatrughna are at their uncle's home. Someone must shoulder the responsibility of ruling the kingdom. For how can any kingdom prosper without ■ king? In such ■ state there would be no discipline among the masses; there would be no law and order; even inside the family there would be feuds and mutual mistrust; commerce and agriculture would suffer; the good deeds will remain unperformed and, consequently, natural elements will be displeased with men, and there would be no rains in time; and the scriptures and prayers will be neglected. In ■ word, the good people will be unprotected and the bad people will be unpunished."

Vasiṣṭha then told the ministers, Siddhārtha, Vijaya, Jayanta, Aśoka and Nandana: "Bharata and Śatrughna are very young men. If they hear of their father's death they will be unduly shocked. So don't send them the news; also keep ■■■■ about any enquiries of theirs about Rāma, for Bharata might commit suicide if he learns that it was his own mother who was behind Rāma's exile. If Bharata kills himself, Kaikeyī's wishes would go unfulfilled and thereby Daśaratha's promise to her would be broken. Not only that; even Rāma's allegiance to his father would be set at naught; besides, Rāma would never accept the throne before the period of exile, even if Bharata should die earlier; he would only cede it to Śatrughna. You know Śatrughna is inexperienced and unfit for kingship. So I request you to go to Girivraja and bring home Bharata and Śatrughna without speaking to them about Daśaratha's death."

The ministers were impressed by Vasiṣṭha's words, and bowing to him went on their mission. Neither the ministers nor the charioteer nor the horses could bring themselves to eat on their way, for they were burdened with the weight of grief. They arrived a few hours before morning at their destination and had to wait till daylight to enter the palace.

At about the time the Ayodhya ministers reached Girivrajapura Bharata was still asleep and was having a bad dream, in which he saw a dishevelled Daśaratha, besmeared with oil all over his body, wallowing in mire; a desolate Ayodhyā with the palace towers the flag poles broken; and an inconsolable Kausalyā and an equally sad Sumitrā. Bharata woke up with a shocked cry; he feared the dream portended ill.

When he woke up he heard the news that the Ayodhyā messengers were waiting for him. Much worried, he inquired them after the welfare of the royal family of Kosala. In reply they cleverly told him, as suggested by Vasiṣṭha, that the kingdom of Kosala was eagerly awaiting his quick return, and that they came to escort him home accordingly. Then Bharata sent word to Śatrughna to get ready to leave for Ayodhyā. They both took leave of their uncle, who sent through them some presents for Daśaratha and Rāma and asked them to convey his best wishes for Kaikeyī.

On their way back home, Bharata and Śatrughna came across several bad omens--- like the sight of cats and snakes, the harsh cries of dogs and foxes, the hoots of wild birds. For seven days they travelled restlessly and fasting all the time. On the eighth day they reached Ayodhyā in the early morning.

As they reached Ayodhyā, Bharata addressed the charioteer: "Look at this town, which always used to wear a welcoming look, and which is now resembling a faded flower! What happened to this resort of grace and splendour that its people should now look like mourners?."

The chariot passed through the main city gate known as Vijayavanta. At that time the sun shone in all its brilliance. But still, the city of Ayodhyā could not reflect any sunny brightness. The streets were almost empty and the shopkeepers were not coming out to open their shops. Bharata's whole frame shook with misgivings. As they approached the palace, the royal flag was flying half-mast.

Bharata got down at Kaikeyī's palace, and went up to her room. Since it was after a long interval she was seeing him, Kaikeyī's delight was indescribable. As she was about to take him

in her arms, he bowed to her ■ bended knees. Kaikeyī's heart was full of love for Bharata. She was elated at the thought of becoming the mother of a king. Her tears of joy fell on the head of the bowing prince. Then bidding him to be seated on a high chair, she asked him to tell her all the news of Girivrajapura. Bharata replied that both the king and the people were doing well, and conveyed to her the best wishes of her father, Kekaya. He also told her that the king sent through him valuable gifts for Daśaratha and Rāma.

All the time he was talking, there was to be seen no joy in his features. Kaikeyī was puzzled. She trembled at the thought of Bharata's unfavourable reaction to all that he did for her.

Bharata said: "Mother, I could not see all the usual pomp and pageantry as I entered this city. Before I left Girivrajapura, I had a bad dream at about the time the messengers from here arrived there. My heart is filled with fear and grief. Tell me the truth: Are the King, Kausalyā, Sumitrā, Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa safe? Why don't I see them? Where are they? Tell me, and I will go and bow to their revered feet."

Kaikeyī's mind was struck ■ sad blow. Have all her dreams gone waste? Is she not destined to feast her eyes on the sight of her son's coronation? Must she die with all her wishes unfulfilled?

She replied: "Child, King Daśaratha enjoyed his life to the full and his fame reached far and wide. He was a great man who did great deeds for his people. He is now gracing the kingdom of heaven."

Bharata cried "Oh, father!" and then fell in a swoon.

Coming to, after a while, he rushed up to his father's bed. He could not find him there. Then he sobbed like a forlorn child. Oh, how strange are the ways of God that ■ realized soul like Bharata should grieve for a mortal being like ■ foolish fellow!

Kaikeyī said: "Son, please get up and pull yourself together. Is it right that ■ great prince like you should weep like this? Soon power and fortune are going to woo you. You have to uphold the rule of law and Dharma. You have to be worthy of your mighty heritage. Your mind should be ever alert and must shine like the

midday sun. No misfortune should see you ruffled. You have to be equal to the call of your duty like a hero."

The ingenuous Bharata could not make out the deeper import of Kaikeyī's counsel. He said: "Mother, before I left for Girivrajapura I thought I would be able to come back here soon to witness the crowning of Rāma ■ prince while our father was alive. I never thought that Fate willed it otherwise. How can I bear this grief? What was the reason for the king's sudden demise? Oh, how unfortunate I am that I could not serve my father in his last hours--- my father who cared so much about me that he would brush away even ■ speck of dust on my clothes! And where is Śrī Rāma? Now he alone is my saviour. I must hasten to him and kiss the dust of his feet. He would convey to me any message our father left me."

Kaikeyī turned pale. She could not consciously lie or depart from the path of justice, and yet she could not let her ardent wishes go fruitless. There arose in her mind ■ conflict between her natural honesty and her love of fame and fortune. She said: "Bharata, at the time of his expiry your father did not utter your ■■■■■ but that of Rāma. He only regretted his misfortune which denied him the chance of surviving the return of Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa."

Bharata realized that Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were away somewhere at the time of Daśaratha's death. His whole frame trembled with grief. He asked his mother: "Why was it that Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were not at my father's bedside when he died?"

Kaikeyī replied in ■ placatory tone: "Rāma, clad like ■ hermit, went to the Daṇḍaka forest in the company of Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa."

Upon which Bharata said: "Mother, I can't make out your words. What harm did Rāma do to the State that he should be banished?"

Kaikeyī has full confidence in her son, and was sure he would not go against her wishes. So she foolishly said: "Rāma did ■■■ harm to anyone. Your father was making all arrangements for

crowning Rāma as his successor during your absence from here. He once granted me two boons, during his fight with the demon Śambara, which I could seek from him whenever I chose. When the time came for their being properly received, I requested him to make you his successor and to send Rāma away to the jungle for fourteen years. I never asked Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa to go to the forest. They followed Rāma of their own free will. As the kings of Ikṣvāku dynasty are not known to break their promises, your father could not choose but accept my two wishes. When Rāma went away, the king could not bear the separation and died. Now, please believe me that I did everything with your best interests at heart. Don't waste any more time in useless argument and take up your responsibility. Please first perform your father's last rites under the guidance of sage Vasiṣṭha and then get ready for your coronation. Your father made you his heir. As a true Kṣatriya you have gained a kingdom and it is up to you to rule it with truth and justice."

Bharata was then assailed by anger and frustration. He thought: "To what base deed my mother has stooped down! What irreparable hurt she caused the noble Rāma! What grievous blot she brought on the escutcheon of the great Ikṣvāku clan! I never sought the Ikṣvāku throne. How can I ever face Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa--- after causing them such distress? How can I console Kausalyā?" As he was thus grieving, his eyes closed as in stupor.

HALLUCINATION

At that point Bharata felt the tearful presence of Daśaratha before his eyes. Seeing his father's state, he himself began to cry like a child. He felt that his father was embracing him and was telling him: "Child, you are the embodiment of Dharma. Don't acquiesce in your mother's wishes. The Ikṣvāku throne has already been offered to Rāma. Is it right that you should ascend it now? Is it fair that Rāma, who loves his people like his own children, should have been sent to the forest? Oh, to what dire tortures Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa may be succumbing in that exile! You who are the offspring of a divinely granted porridge must not fall a prey to your mother's wiles. Perhaps she herself was the victim of someone's evil counsel. Please go to the forest and bring back Sītā,

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Then you can officiate in the coronation of Rāma and win eternal fame for your self-sacrifice."

When the presence of Daśaratha's spirit withdrew, Bharata saw before his mental eye Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, clad like hermits and giving him their blessings. He then bowed to their feet. He begged their forgiveness for his mother's misdeed. He beseeched Rāma to accept the kingship of Kosala, and said he would commit suicide if his request were denied. Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa shed tears of gratification at Bharata's nobility. They showered flowers on him. His joy knew no bounds...

When he opened his eyes Kaikeyī alone was before him.

In Bharata's visage could be seen the light of a noble soul who realized God. His voice is so soft to his heart. But he could not condone the mean act his mother did out of too much affection for him. So, angered at all the evil that happened to his father, Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, he abused her: "You wretched woman, what ill luck fated me to be your child! Did you really believe that I craved for all this pomp? Do you think I can survive this parting from my revered father and brother? How could you, after causing them so much misery, now venture to ask me to accept this ill gotten throne? This double folly of yours is increasing my grief like the clarified butter poured into fire. Oh yes, your mother came of the serpent race. So it must be that you inherited some of the poisonous character. But is this the gratitude you show to Kausalyā for all the loving care she bestowed on you? You ingrate, did you pause to think of Rāma's devotion to you? Don't you know how much I revere him? The goblin of greed has won you over; else you would not have stooped to such folly for my sake. How do you expect me to rule this kingdom without the help of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, on whom even my father used to rely so much? Even if I could, I would not undertake this unmerited responsibility. Your wishes will not bear fruit. Here, I am severing all my relations with you. As soon as I perform my father's last rites, I shall proceed to the forest and fetch Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa back to Ayodhyā. I myself will place the crown on Rāma's noble head and lead my life happily in his service. I would prefer death to being called your son. As for you, an unjust woman like you has no place in Ayodhyā. You do not have the

traits of ■ queen. The proper place for ■ demon like you is the Daṇḍaka forest. Don't think your sins will go unpunished. There, the messengers of hell are getting ready to put you to all sorts of torture. In the meantime, you will see me wandering like ■ monk in the forest, and your disappointment and anguish will be your death. I am letting you go unpunished because of my regard for Rāma, who always respected you. Get away from my presence. I shall now go to Kausalyā and begging her pardon for all the harm you did, shall promise her that I will be Rāma's servant and will ■■ to it that he ■■■■ back to take his rightful place on the Ikṣvāku throne."

Kaikeyī was crestfallen. The plot of Mantharā failed. She herself was left with disillusionment and disappointment. Life seemed to be ■ burden to her. "Man proposes, God disposes" is well illustrated in Kaikeyī. She began cursing Mantharā. All looked blank to her. She felt she was the meanest of Daśaratha's wives. Verily, doing wrong is easy, but it is hard to rectify it. Kaikeyī had ■ feeling that all Ayodhyā was mocking at her. She could not think of what to do next. However, suddenly ■ silver lining appeared in her dark clouds. She ■■■ ■■■■ that Rāma would never go back upon his word and would refuse to return to Ayodhyā and instead would enjoin on Bharata to be the king till his return.

Bharata reached Kausalyā's palace. As they saw him, everyone there remained motionless--- for he was ■ picture of grief. As he approached Kausalyā he broke into loved sobs and fell at her feet. The tender hearted Kausalyā always loved Bharata like her own son.

Bharata told her: "Mother, forgive me. My mother Kaikeyī made a great mistake out of her excessive fondness for me. But I am not going to be a party to her folly. The kingdom of Kosala is Rāma's by former promise and by the right of his elder birth. Whoever refutes this opinion of mine will be a quick target for my sword. ■ here and now swear that I will bring back Rāma and place him ■ the Ikṣvāku throne. I am ■■■ of this noble race, whose scions never break their promises. Give me your blessings, for I no longer look upon Kaikeyī ■ my mother, and ■■■■ you as my spiritual mother."

Kausalyā's heart melted. She was reminded of Daśaratha's words. She understood that Bharata was really the personification of *Dharma*. His love for Rāma was unrivalled. And yet, she also knew her son very well and wasn't sure he would return to Ayodhyā before his period of exile. Her inner voice said, "Rāma would not accede to Bharata's well-meaning request", and so her heart was heavy with sympathy for the noble Bharata, whose stature in her eyes grew up higher because of his self-sacrificing spirit.

CONSOLING BHARATA

Kausalyā told Bharata: "Dear boy, your words are really befitting your status and reputation. You are worthy of your brother Rāma. Besides, you are the fruit of the divine porridge. Your father had irrevocable faith in you; he knew you would never usurp Rāma. Now I can see the image of Rāma in you. You and Rāma are the same to me. However, I must ask you to respect your mother's wishes and ascend the throne. She is inherently a good woman; it is only the force of destiny that made her cruel. It is but natural, nonetheless, that she should want her son to be king. We can only conclude that it is also the decree of Fate that Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa should be living in exile. Anyway, there is no use crying over spilt milk. Alas, there, look at your father's corpse!"

Weeping loudly and with faltering steps, Bharata approached his father's body and fell at his feet. Then, as though addressing his soul, Kausalyā told Daśaratha: "Sir, Bharata is at your feet. He is not honouring his mother's wishes. I am able to see Rāma in Bharata; hereafter I shall consider Bharata as my own son. He is a worthy son of yours and can rule Ayodhyā, in keeping with the reputation of Ikṣvāku dynasty."

Thereupon Bharata said: "Mother, don't you take my word for it? Do you think I merely boasted when I said I would not ascend the Kosala throne? In each artery and vein of mine flows the blood of my devotion to Rāma. I only want to be his servant. If I ever think otherwise, ■■■ in my dreams, may I meet the end of ■ despicable sinner!"

Kausalyā and all those around her were greatly impressed by Bharata's love for his elder brother.

Bharata renewed his lamentation: "Father, I didn't have the luck to serve you in your last days. My mother has done you an irreparable harm. I am ashamed of being her son. I am grateful to you for being the author of my existence. I will never do anything to bring our clan into disrepute. I am not such a covetous person as to wish to usurp Rāma, the real lord of Ayodhyā. As God is my witness, I swear I will never ascend the throne of Ikṣvāku kings."

Then Kausalyā said: "Bharata, your sacrifice is great. You are the exemplary scion of a noble race. May your fame last for ever!" Even on the face of Daśaratha there appeared a mysterious look of satisfaction. How fortunate was he to have such sons!

At that moment Vasiṣṭha and other sages, Sumantra and other ministers, arrived there. As they saw Bharata their grief was renewed. Crying like a child, Bharata fell at Vasiṣṭha's feet. The sage said: "Bharata, the king took care of all his people like his own children. His death is a loss not only to yourself but also to all mankind. That you were away at the time of his demise was a decree of Fate. Don't blame anyone for it. Now please get ready to perform his last rites."

So at last Bharata himself had to undertake the job. Following ancient tradition, he first bathed in the Sarayū river, on the banks of which was the cremation ground. The corpse of Daśaratha was brought there, after it was washed in holy waters. It was carried in a golden hearse to the accompaniment of funeral music, and was followed by the royal family, the sages, the ministers, the armed forces and the general public.

As the cortège passed through the streets, people stood in respectful homage on either side; flowers, perfumed minerals and valuable coins were being strewn over the King's body. The people were singing his praises and remembering all the good things he did for them. They were also all admiration for Bharata, when they learnt about his determination to bring back Rāma to Ayodhyā. The sun was about to set. Perhaps he waited till the cremation was to take place to pay homage to the descendant of his race.

When the corpse was placed on the funeral pyre, the river itself seemed to shed tears. The pyre was made up of sandalwood and other rich wooden pieces. Perfumed oils were poured upon it. After fulfilling all the royal honours to it, the body was placed on it. His three wives went around it thrice in their last reverent homage, and placed flowers at his feet. Guns were fired in last salute. All around people chanted the **Om** Rāma, which **was** so dear to the departed soul.

After taking his dip in the holy Sarayū, Bharata lit the pyre **in** the accompaniment of Vedic hymns by Vasiṣṭha and other sages.

And so, like every mortal, Daśaratha too joined his forefathers, who were pleased to receive him--- like the great God, Agni, who accepted the sacrifice of his mortal remains.

The burial ground has been through the ages embracing the physical remains of the great Ikṣvāku kings. Though none of us could **see** their actual live figures, we can meditate on the way of all flesh and try to emulate the mighty kings whose spiritual entities, born of their noble deeds, **live** for ever alive.

Bharata addressed the people who came to witness the last rites: "Beloved citizens of Ayodhyā, Daśaratha is no more. Rāma is in the Daṇḍaka forest. He alone is fit to rule you, and it is my responsibility to see that he does so. Please do not blame me for my mother's folly. I come of the Ikṣvāku stock which is not known to break its promises. I promise you that I will only be the servant of Rāma, and I hope to receive your affection and blessings all the time."

The people tearfully and respectfully heard his message and nodded their approval. They prayed to God for his and Rāma's well-being. They and Bharata took another dip in the Sarayū and went back to their respective places.

The ten days of Aśauca (during which period the members of the dead person's family observe the austerity of "not touching" others) were gone. On the eleventh day was the bath of purification; **on** the twelfth, the final oblations to the departed **were** offered; on the thirteenth, the ashes were immersed in the river. As Bharata **was** overwhelmed with grief at the sight of the dusty

remains of his mighty parent, Vasiṣṭha consoled him: "Hunger and thirst, grief and delusion, old age and death, are inevitable to all creatures. You who know all *Dharmas* must not grieve like this. Please pull yourself together and do your apportioned duty as an offering to God."

Returning home, Bharata presented the poor people and the learned pundits with appropriate gifts. Everywhere were to be heard the praises of Daśaratha, Rāma and Bharata.

Śatrughna told the still unconsoled Bharata: "Dear brother, it is time you forsook all this moping. The people are awaiting your orders. Kindly do your duty by them." Bharata looked pitifully at him. Śatrughna was also moved to tears.

At that juncture there was heard a commotion. Śatrughna went out to see what was the matter. The gatekeepers were not allowing Mantharā to enter the palace. She was shouting in protest at them. They told Śatrughna that she was the one who really plotted Rāma's exile. Angered, Śatrughna gave her a kick. As a result of her consequent fall on the ground, all her jewels were scattered about. Those who gathered there were pleased with the punishment she got. Mantharā somehow managed to escape Śatrughna's further chastisement, and ran up to Kaikeyī and fell at her feet. Kaikeyī feared it was not possible to save Mantharā, so she saw Śatrughna following her with uncontrollable anger.

Śatrughna said: "Kaikeyī, it was you who caused us all this agony. You two have brought shame on the whole Ikṣvāku dynasty. I am sparing you because you are Bharata's mother, but if you don't release Mantharā, you too will have to suffer from my wrath."

Kaikeyī then rushed up to Bharata, along with Mantharā. Śatrughna followed them. On his mother's appeal, Bharata stopped Śatrughna: "Brother, women must not be killed because they are helpless. It is against all canons of justice, and if you kill them Rāma will never forgive you. Leave them alone."

Śatrughna was pacified.

On the fourteenth day (after the last rites) the ministers assembled in Bharata's palace. They told Bharata: "You have to honour your father's wishes and ascend the throne rightaway. Any kingdom without a king cannot safeguard law and order. There will be not only anarchy, but our enemies will conquer us also. The people see Rāma in you, and it is up to you to vindicate the glory of the Ikṣvāku clan."

GOOD INTENTION

Two teardrops fell from Bharata's eyes. He replied: "Gentlemen, I have not the right even to touch the Kosala throne. It has been from time immemorial ceded to the eldest son. Rāma is the only rightful heir, and we must all go to the forest and persuade him to come back. The goddess of kingly prosperity, Lakṣmī, has gone away with the departure of Sītā: Sītā will have to return, for then alone will there be light and joy in this kingdom. Let all arrangements be made for Rāma's coronation. Let ■ royal highway be formed for us to go to Citrakūṭa mountain. You shall all accompany me to Citrakūṭa."

The ministers thought that Bharata spoke like a true hero, and his words were like nectar to them. Since the return of Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa was ■ matter of universal gratification, they readily agreed to Bharata's proposal.

A smooth highroad was built across the forest; on both sides were planted beautiful trees; even lovely parks were laid here and there.

As he thought Rāma could be convinced by a well-represented popular appeal, Bharata ordered ■ proclamation that great sages like Vasiṣṭha, the three queens, noble Brahmins, wise statesmen, prominent merchants, learned artists and brave members of the armed forces should get ready to follow him to the forest.

Vasiṣṭha knew that Rāma would not accept Bharata's entreaty. So, on his own initiative, he sent word for the ministers, feudal lords and other respected citizens to assemble in the court. Tearfully Bharata entered the court-hall. All the gathering stood

up and saluted him. Then Vasiṣṭha said: "Prince, the people of Ayodhyā are touched by your noble determination to bring back Rāma here, and they appreciate your great spirit of self-sacrifice. They now see that you are really worthy of being their king. Please accept our allegiance, and fulfil both Rāma's vow and Daśaratha's command. After all, you know that all of you, the sons of Daśaratha, are his equal heirs."

Bharata replied: "Revered sage, my brother Rāma--- the first-born, the embodiment of Truth and Justice, the darling of the people--- alone is fit to rule. I, who can only sit at his feet, how can I put on that diamond-studded crown? Forgive me for my inability to accept your wish. I can only stand in salutation to my noble brother, the divine Rāma."

The courtiers were all convinced of Bharata's sincerity and determination, and were willing to accompany him to Citrakūṭa.

As Bharata and his party were leaving for Citrakūṭa, on an auspicious day, the city of Ayodhyā itself looked like moving out of its roots. Oh what ecstasy, what wild expectation of the joy of seeing Rāma, filled the whole crowd!

Resting in the parks and on the river-banks on the way, and chanting the name of Rāma, Bharata and party arrived in the city of Śrīgibera. There Bharata offered ■■■ oblation to his dead father with the sacred Gaṅgā waters. Sumantra told the party about Guha, the king of that town. Learning about his devotion to Rāma, they were all pleased.

Guha could not make out what all that commotion was about. As he took a keen glance at the party approaching from a distance, he could discern the royal flag of Ikṣvāku dynasty on the leading chariot. Then he thought: 'Ah, what's the reason for all this? There I ■■■ Bharata in that golden chariot. Isn't he contented with the kingdom of Kosala? Else, why should he come down to this area with his army? Or could it be that he is bent on doing some harm to Sitā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa? No, that should never happen. As long as I ■■■ alive, I should do all I can to ■■■ that nothing untoward happened to Rāma.'

Guha's whole being was filled with his devotion to Rāma. That was why he could look with compassion on Bharata, the dear brother of Rāma. On calm consideration he surmised that it might be Bharata's intention to fetch back Rāma to Ayodhyā and arrange for his coronation. As he was convinced further by his inner voice, his whole body felt a rapturous thrill and he set aside his fears.

So he decided to greet Bharata as befitting ■ great king. He ordered his people to bring along costly presents of gold and silver, rich raiments of silk, cow's milk and sumptuous eatables. And, followed by his entourage, he went up to greet Bharata.

On seeing the approaching Guha, Sumantra told Bharata: "The great devotee, Guha, is coming with his followers to give you ■ royal welcome. I told you all about him already--- this is the same good man who ferried Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa across the Gaṅgā. In his kingdom there are many able archers; he told Rāma that they would attend on him, and asked him to stay with his people. But Rāma, as becoming an exile, refused such protective hospitality. Now be prepared to meet this noble friend of Rāma."

A FRIENDLY ENCOUNTER

Accompanied by Sumantra, Bharata proceeded to meet Guha. Guha's joy was boundless. He embraced the embodiment of Dharma, Bharata. He could see Rāma in his beloved brother. Bharata reciprocated all the feelings of Guha--- it was like the confluence of rivers Gaṅgā and Yamunā, the inner stream of Sarasvatī being Rāma in that *Trivenī* like union. Now Rāma, Bharata and Guha are united in one sacred bond of mutual love and regard. Really, Guha and Bharata alone deserve the name of 'devotee' fully.

Guha told Bharata: "Welcome, sir! All the scions of Ikṣvāku are dear to us. Our capital is like Ayodhyā to you. I have already had the great good fortune of welcoming Rāma, and now I am doubly gratified to have this opportunity of playing host to his dear brother. Please accept these humble gifts of ours and rest a while in our midst. Now kindly tell me what brought you to these parts. If you are on your way to see Rāma, why all this large entourage?"

Bharata was deeply touched. He replied: "Brother Guha, I am indeed grateful to you. Let me tell you I have no designs on Rāma or his kingship. The kingdom of Kosala is Rāma's birthright. I have only come to beg him to return home and receive what is his due. I thought, singly I might not be able to persuade him. So I brought along a representative section of Ayodhyā. If Rāma doesn't return to Ayodhyā, Ayodhyā will be a Daṇḍaka jungle. Rāma is my all. If he doesn't accept my request, death alone will be my refuge... We shall rest here for the night and leave early in the morning. Please make arrangements for our crossing the Gaṅgā tomorrow."

Guha's heart melted. He thought: "How noble is this Bharata! The sacred blood of his Ikṣvāku forbears is flowing in his veins. How lucky was Daśaratha to have such sons! How holy is Ayodhyā to have such offspring! How blessed I am to entertain such guests!"

Bharata asked Guha: "Brother, tell me where did Rāma and Sītā sleep when they were here? What sort of food did they eat?"

Remembering that night, Guha was invaded by uncontrollable grief. He saw before his mental eye Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. He replied: "They fasted that night. They drank the holy Gaṅgā water Lakṣmaṇa brought them. They laid themselves down on the green leaves spread on the bare earth. Seeing their plight, Lakṣmaṇa was much grieved. There and then Lakṣmaṇa took a vow that he would not sleep a wink till Rāma and Sītā safely got back to Ayodhyā.

Hearing these words, Bharata's grief was renewed and his determination to take back Rāma to Ayodhyā was doubly strengthened. Like his brother, he too fasted that night. Bharata's example was followed by his followers, who said that they would not touch any sweetmeats till they saw Rāma. Guha promised that he would take them across the Gaṅgā the next morning.

Like the wildfire that burns mighty forest trees, the agony for the sake of Rāma was consuming Bharata's whole being. He pictured mentally Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa before him. He felt they actually came before him and thought that they were shedding tears, seeing his agony. Rāma seemed to say: "Bharata,

why are you thus lamenting? Is this proper for a scholarly personage like you? Neither you nor your mother is to blame for all that happened to me. It was merely the decree of Fate. You have a special place in my heart. Now, it doesn't become an Ikṣvāku heir to weep like this. Pull yourself together!"

Tears of joy rolled down Bharata's cheeks. He saluted to Rāma's feet. At that moment he found himself fully awake. He saw it was nearing dawn.

Early next morning Bharata called Śatrughna. As the latter was already awake, he responded immediately and went up to Bharata. Bharata said: "Brother, so you are already awake? Please send for Guha. We must hasten to Rāma. I am anxious to cross the Gaṅgā rightaway."

RIVER-CROSSING

Then Guha came to Bharata and told him everything was ready for the crossing of the river. The boatmen were moved by the sight of that devoted entourage of Bharata. They too shared the anxiety of Bharata and saw the figure of Rāma in him. They felt gratified at the chance of doing their bit for Rāma and his people.

For Bharata, Guha set apart a boat named 'Svastika'. On its mast the Ikṣvāku flag was hoisted. Along with Bharata, Śatrughna, the three queens and Vasiṣṭha entered that boat. The rest of the party got into the boats arranged for them. The elephants and the horses swam across alongside.

Guha told Bharata: "May Lord Rāma, who for ever dwells in our hearts, protect us! Please accept my hospitality again on your way back. Please convey my respects to Śrī Rāma and Sītā Devī."

Bharata was pleased with Guha's hospitality and kind words. He knew not how to express his gratitude. He suddenly embraced Guha. They both saw Rāma in each other. In that single moment they felt the eternal ~~union~~ with the universal spirit and with each other. Unwillingly they took leave of each other.

GOOD OMENS

Rāma felt his right eye ~~was~~ throbbing ■ ■ sign of good things to happen; similarly Sītā's left eye throbbed, ■ good thing for women. For ■ reason unknown to him, Rāma's heart was jumping with joy. He felt the presence of Bharata and Guha before his mental eye. Tears of happiness rolled down his cheeks. His body experienced ■ thrill, and he was shining with a divine brilliance. Sītā could not make it out; nor could Lakṣmaṇa. Oh, what an inexpressible feeling is this! Such indeed must be the nature of God's love for his devotees. That is why the devotees long so much for the affection of their Lord.

Rāma told Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa: "I ~~was~~ before me the ethereal presence of Bharata and Guha--- both my earnest devotees. You cannot see them with your physical eyes. But my heart is full of them. Maybe this is the reward I can offer them for their immense devotion to me." Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa were pleasantly surprised at Rāma's love for his devotees.

As the boats were crossing the river, the people who gathered there prayed to God: "May Bharata succeed in his efforts! May Rāma accept the rulership of Kosala kingdom! May the people enjoy constant peace and prosperity in Rāma's kingdom!

Rāma's name was resounding on all four corners. River Gaṅgā felt herself sanctified. She was reminded of the day when Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa crossed her waters. She admired Bharata's devotion to Rāma. She touched his feet and felt the same sacred thrill as when she formerly touched Rāma's. She was overjoyed by feeling Rāma in Bharata.

For his part, Bharata sprinkled the holy waters on his head and prayed to her ■ bended knees: "Sacred Gaṅgā, I salute you. You know the greatest light of our clan, Rāma, went into exile along with Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa. I cannot be ■ party to, the wish of my mother, which was the ■ of this sad event. Please bless me that I may be able to bring back Rāma to Ayodhyā. If he doesn't accede to my entreaty I shall remain in the forest myself. On our way back I shall offer you fruits and flowers as prayerful reward."

Tears ~~were~~ dropping from his eyes like a stream. The hearts of all those around him melted. The whole party prayed to Gaṅgā

with Kumkum, turmeric, fruits and flowers. With all these adorning her, Gaṅgā was shining brilliantly. Gaṅgā was pleased with herself. She felt that Bharata's touch was ■ blissfully tender ■ Rāma's.

Standing on the river bank, Guha thought: "How selfless is Bharata's devotion and affection! How blessed is Rāma to have such ■ brother! And how pure is Bharata's heart! May Bharata's glory for ever shine on the banks of Gaṅgā!"

A man's greatness is dependent on the power of his love and devotion to God and to his fellow men. It is these qualities, which are inherent in each man, that can drive away his equally ingrained ills of intolerance and iniquity. Each one of us ■ conquer our internal enemies of anger and hatred if we can follow in the footsteps of great men like Bharata, if we ■ assimilate the message of the lives of such great souls.

The boat 'Svastika' was crossing the river like ■ royal swan. Bharata was delighted with its passage. He could hear the ■ of Rāma being chanted all the time; he was actually filled with the thoughts of Rāma in such ■ way as to be oblivious to the worldly concerns and worries. By the time he recovered his mundane awareness, the boat reached the other bank. He, Śatrughna and the others bade farewell to Gaṅgā. Bharata gave apt presents to the boatmen. Although they did not like to receive monetary reward for their labour of love, they could not offend Bharata by refusing his gifts. Taking their leave of Bharata, they said: "O great prince, we see Rāma in you. Please send for us when you come back with Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. We will again ferry you across the river. Rāma alone is capable of releasing us from the bondage of life and death. May the glory of Rāma's and yours shine for ever!"

On his way he heard the koels in the trees ■ the Gaṅgā banks welcoming him with their sweet songs. He was highly pleased with the peaceful serenity of the whole surroundings.

BHARADVĀJA'S HERMITAGE

Bharata decided on visiting Bharadvāja's hermitage. Accordingly, he instructed his entourage to pitch their tents in the nearby 'Prayāga' garden.

Bharata divested himself of his royal robes and ornaments. He bathed in the Gaṅgā waters, and then putting on his austere clothes, he proceeded towards the old sage's abode in the company of Vasiṣṭha, Sumantra and other elders. The sage was awaiting their arrival, for he knew already about it by virtue of his clairvoyant powers. Bharata prostrated at his feet. The sage was enraptured at the gesture of the prince and blessed him: "May Bharata enjoy constant success!" After offering the prince his hospitality, the sage inquired after the welfare of his party.

Bharadvāja could see traces of Daśaratha in Bharata's visage. At that moment Bharata's eyes were wet with unshed tears. The sage could understand the reason for Bharata's agony. Bharata said: "Revered saint, you are omniscient. You know how owing to her excessive fondness for me, my mother inflicted on Daśaratha and Rāma terrible distress. I have no right to ascend the sacred throne of Ayodhyā. My sole aim is to be Rāma's servant. So kindly show me the way to Citrakūṭa and bless me that I may be able to convince Rāma to come back to Ayodhyā and accept his apportioned role of ruling us all."

Bharadvāja was delighted with Bharata's brotherly love and self-sacrifice. He blessed that his fame might live for ever. Then he asked the prince to bring along with him the rest of his followers. Bharata agreed to do so. The sage said that the scions of Ikṣvāku were all well-known for their obedience to elders, their sense of duty, their honesty and integrity, their self-control and their attachment to all the good and good things on earth. Bharata was then reminded of his ancestral heritage. He was again grieved at the thought of his mother's misdeed.

The ministers, feudal lords and the courtiers saluted Bharadvāja. When Kausalyā saw the fatherly figure of the sage, she was reminded of her sad lot and was filled with grief. The sage consoled her, and she stood aside after bowing to him respectfully and gratefully. Sumitrā likewise paid her respects to him. The whole party from Ayodhyā was delighted with the blessings they received from the great saint.

HOSPITALITY

Sage Bharadvāja prayed to Lord Agni to enable him to make all the needed arrangements for the guests, and invited all the gods in heaven to take part in the reception. The heavenly denizens joined the gathering, and the hermitage then resembled a flourishing city. The rich variety of flora was blossoming in full splendour; the angels and archangels were singing the songs of spring; the heavenly damsels were dancing, as some of their friends were playing the lute. It appeared as though the whole neighbourhood took part in the celebration, for even the trees seemed to sing and dance according to the rhythm of the entertainment provided by the visitors from paradise.

All the guests were served various sumptuous dishes; they were followed by delicious drinks and luscious fruits and puddings. And the horses and elephants were fed with succulent grass and sugarcane respectively. The elephant-boys and the horsemen were so intoxicated with the food and drink that they could not recognize their own respective beasts.

All this splendour seemed to the Ayodhyā citizens as if they were partaking of Lord Indra's hospitality in Heaven. They forgot all about their home-town and even about their intended visit to Citrakūṭa, and in their luxurious indolence wished to remain where they were. Oh! how mysterious are the ways of Providence! The really wise men do not crave the transient pleasures of the world; but the ordinary people think that these fleeting joys are eternal and consequently subject themselves to disappointment and distress.

After the feast was over, Bharadvāja told Bharata: "Prince, about five kilometres from here is ■ jungle. Beyond that is ■ lovely mountain range. That is the home of all natural grace, Citrakūṭa. Between those beautiful hills and the river Mandākinī is ■ valley. There you will find ■ cottage. That is the abode of Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Please rest here tonight. You can proceed on your journey in the early morning." Bharata agreed to do so.

The next morning Bharata went up to Bharadvāja to take leave of him. Bharadvāja blessed him and his party. He told

Kaṣalyā: "Madam, please do not grieve. You are the mother of a hero, the goddess of Dharma. Thanks to this exile of Rāma the whole world will soon reap rich benefits. You will find your own life sanctified, for having given birth to such a saviour of mankind. The heirs of Ikṣvāku are not known to go back on their word. I can see in Bharata the same virtues as those of Rāma." Kausalyā was very much consoled and delighted. She bade farewell to the sage and, taking Bharata in her arms, blessed him and thanked him for his devotion to Rāma.

The rest of the party, who were asleep as it were, in the arms of Māyā (deceptive appearance), saw in their dreams Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Consequently their illusions were dispelled. As they woke up they saw Bharata getting ready to leave for Citrakūṭa.

The mighty entourage of Bharata was proceeding southwards, crossing wild forests and deep lakes on the way. Hearing the tumult of their passage, the birds and beasts of the forest were fleeing hither and thither. Just like the ocean at high tide and the sky covered with dark clouds, Bharata's party, which included a mighty army and gigantic war-horses and elephants, seemed to spread across the whole earth--- leaving no space for the rest of the world.

MOUNT CITRAKŪTA

Bharata told his entourage: "Look, there is the mount Citrakūṭa! In its valley we can see the flower-trees shedding their blossoms like little showers falling from white clouds. Just see how enchantingly those flower-bunches are hidden behind lush-green leaves! Oh, look at those skipping deers! Do not the white spots on their backs look like scattered jasmines? And see those peacocks dancing in full feather, those butterflies sucking honey, those loving *Cakravaka* bird-pairs! Ah, hear those scintillating songs of the *koels*! Oh, how uniquely lovely is the whole atmosphere of Citrakūṭa!

"Now you people may rest here for a while. I shall send some brave soldiers to find out the whereabouts of the royal exiles. In the meantime Vasiṣṭha, Sumantra, Śatrughna and I shall go to that

region wherefrom smoke is coming. Somebody must be living there. You may rest assured nothing inconvenient to you will happen before ~~we~~ return."

The entourage was pleased with Bharata's concern for them and thanked him heartily. The army camped at the spot indicated by him.

Here, as the days went by, Citrakūṭa lost its first attraction for Sītā, she was no longer content with the observation of its natural splendour. However, Rāma, after finishing his morning prayers, would show her around the valley and describe its various beauty spots— to turn her mind away from sad thoughts.

LIFE IN THE FOREST

One day Sītā and Rāma went out on their morning stroll. Then Rāma told her: "Beloved queen, here all the animals are moving about fearlessly. And look at those *Kinnera* pairs of lovers! How nice it is to see their mutual love! There, see how those springs are emerging from the hillocks! Amid these lovely surroundings full of flowers and fruits, attended on by Lakṣmaṇa, and enjoying your company, I could gladly spend any number of years in exile. Besides, the wise men tell us that life in the forest is conducive to self-realization and contentment."

Hearing these words, Sītā was consoled. The next day Rāma took her to the river bank. He said: "Dear Sītā, this is the holy Mandākinī. This has become doubly sacred on account of the baths great sages took in it. Look at these sand dunes. One cannot describe the extent of ecstasy the lovers derive from wandering in these sands on moonlit nights. See those royal swans and those enchanting lotuses. Verily this river looks like Kubera's Saugandhika lake in paradise. There! Even now some saints are taking their dip of self-purificatory ritual. And some other holy men are offering oblations of its holy waters to the Sun-god. Just feel this tender westerly breeze. And enjoy the sight of those flower trees swinging gracefully and dropping their blossoms into the river. Don't you love those *Cakravāka* pairs playing in the flower-bed on the river bank? In fact, Citrakūṭa is no different from Ayodhyā, and Mandākinī is another Sarayū. Think of the living creatures

here as the inhabitants of Ayodhyā. As for me, what more do I want than an obedient brother and a beloved wife? I do not long for the pomp of royalty and the powers of kingship. In such a place, where even congenital enemies among beasts play together like born friends, I experience greater peace of mind and richer sources of joy.

“Well, let us get back to the cottage. Lakṣmaṇa must be impatiently awaiting our return. Oh, how sorry I am that you two are put to so much inconvenience on my account!”

Sītā was greatly moved by her spouse’s words. Looking at her emotionally wet eyes, Rāma patted her tenderly. They entered the cottage where Lakṣmaṇa was waiting for them. Sītā began cooking food. Rāma was keeping her company with wise words.

At that juncture, the whole area kicked up dust into the skies. Ferocious sounds were heard all around. The jungle creatures were frightened by that noise. Coming out of the interior, Rāma rushed up to Lakṣmaṇa who was seated on a marble-stone in the porch, and said: “Lakṣmaṇa, what is all this commotion? Could it be that some king has come down hunting? Or has some wild beast run amuck? Just get up that mango tree and see what is going on.

As Lakṣmaṇa did accordingly, he saw ■ mighty horde coming from the northern direction, resembling a row of ants. On further observing the approaching mass of humanity, Lakṣmaṇa could see that it was Bharata’s army. He was uncontrollably angered. “Was not Bharata satisfied with snatching away Ayodhyā from Rāma? Has he come to harm the peaceful Rāma even in this exile?”, he thought. The quick-tempered Lakṣmaṇa was mistaking Bharata’s mission; so he warned Rāma: “Brother, put out that sacrificial fire. Keep Sītā in the sanctuary of the interior den. Take up your arms and get ready for fight. Bharata is coming; he doesn’t seem to be satisfied with the throne his mother got for him unjustly; he seems to come here to kill us also. There’s ■■■ doubt about it. Such a wicked ■■■■ must be punished. There is nothing wrong in killing the unjust. Let ■■ destroy Bharata and his army. Let their blood flow like a stream ■■ the Citrakūṭa hill. Let their flesh become food for the wild creatures here. May Kaikeyī and Mantharā break their hearts at the ■■■■ of the inglorious end of Bharata. May the gods then shower flowers on you.”

Rāma's heart was touched to the quick. He knew very well the mentality of Bharata. So he admonished Lakṣmaṇa: "Brother, don't come to any conclusion hastily. Bharata is an embodiment of self-sacrifice and dutifulness. He would never mean us harm. Maybe he accepted the throne of Kosala at the behest of our father. But that is not his fault. I think he is now visiting us to pay his respects. Don't kill Bharata and thereby commit ■ grievous folly. Of course, the pleasures of the kingdom, and the three *puruṣārthas* of Dharma, Artha and Kāma belong to you. While it is my duty to see that you all enjoy your mundane rights, for my part I should be concerned only with the ultimate *puruṣārtha*, Mokṣa. I know I have the power to conquer not only Bharata and his army, but also all the three worlds. But Truth and Justice are dearer to me than even the heavenly kingdom of Indra obtained through an unjust means. So, believe me, we have no cause to fear Bharata. You know very well that he never did us any harm. Why should you now suspect him? His whole being is one with my soul. I cannot kill him. If you still doubt his good faith, and want to rule the kingdom of Kosala in his place, I shall gladly ask Bharata and see that your wish is fulfilled." Rāma's words pacified Lakṣmaṇa. Ashamed of himself, he sat down quietly with bowed head. Hearing Rāma's glorious words, Sītā felt her love and admiration for him growing further. She was also pleased with Lakṣmaṇa's concern and affection for Rāma.

Rāma then told Lakṣmaṇa : "There! That is our father's royal mount, the elephant Śatruñjaya. I think our father is coming to take us back to Ayodhyā. But, wait a minute. Why don't we see the white canopy on the elephant's back? The king is not coming, perhaps. It must be Bharata only, as you say. Anyway, come down." Lakṣmaṇa did accordingly. Rāma was glad that Lakṣmaṇa quieted down.

There, Bharata told Śatrughna: "Brother, we must look for Rāma's cottage. Not till I see Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa will my mind be at rest. You know Rāma's feet are lined with the divine imprints of Dhvaja, Vajra, Kamalam, Aṅkuṣa and Amṛtakalaśa. I am anxious to bow to them and beg Rāma to accept his rightful rule of Kosala without any more delay. Oh, how restless I am for the sight of Rāma! How lucky ■■■ Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa to be at his side! And how fortunate is ■■■ mount Citrakūṭa—for it has

become sanctified with the dust of the feet of Sītā and Rāma! We have done a good thing in visiting this sacred spot.”

As Bharata proceeded with his selected company a little farther into the flower-garden, and there got up a tree to take a complete view of the terrain, Rāma's cottage on the banks of Mandākinī appeared to him. He felt that must be the abode of Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. He was greatly delighted. Getting down from the tree, he went a little farther. There he saw the traces of the movements of the sages of the region, and his way has now become safe and soft. At last the cottage of Rāma, covered with blossoming buds, was sighted. In its front porch *Kuśa* grass was laid; on either side were the sacrificial faggots and the ritual utensils. Behind it, on the wall were hanging a pair of bows; close by were sparkling arrows. Nobody is to be seen outside the cottage, but smoke was coming from the interior. So Bharata thought Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were going about their morning prayers and duties. Concentrating his mind on Rāma's divine being, Bharata entered the cottage. Vasiṣṭha, Sumantra and Śatrughna followed him.

There they saw Rāma—the tall, graceful, coruscating diadem of the Ikṣvāku clan—seated on *Kuśa* grass, clad in jute cloth, his torso covered by deerskin, and in the posture of Padmāsana, before the sacrificial fire. His hair has become wildly plaited. His body is not shining with the former princely splendour of perfumed sandal powder, but his whole being was permeated with a heavenly glow. On one side of him Lakṣmaṇa was standing at attention. From another side Sītā was handing him the things he needed for the ritual.

Bharata was saddened at the sight of the humble conditions under which the great scion of Ikṣvāku, Rāma and the darling daughter of the mighty emperor Janaka, Sītā, had to live. He was almost speechless with grief, and could barely articulate the single word, “Brother!” His throat dried up, his heart full of devotion, he prostrated himself before Rāma, for whose sight he has been longing all these days.

BROTHERLY LOVE

Even though Bharata was emaciated through fasting, his clothes were like rags, and his hair was dishevelled, there was ■ divine glow in his features. Sītā and Rāma were pleasantly struck with this mystic grace of his; Lakṣmaṇa was angry with himself for suspecting this great devotee, and realized contritely that Bharata was even greater than himself. Even as Sītā was shedding tears of joy on seeing Bharata's devotion, Lakṣmaṇa shed tears of repentance for his folly.

Śatrughna also bowed to Rāma's feet. All the four brothers were together. Vasiṣṭha and Sumantra were moved by the touching sight of the mutual affection of these offspring of divine Grace.

At that moment Bharata regained his composure. On opening his eyes he found himself in Rāma's embrace. Two teardrops fell from Rāma's eyes on Bharata's forehead. The tender-hearted Rāma can put up with any amount of personal discomfort but cannot stand the sight of others' misfortune. And he always consoles those who are in distress. Bharata knew full well the large-heartedness of Rāma. He again bowed thrice to Rāma's feet.

Rāma said: "Brother, is our father, the great king who performed the mighty sacrifices of Aśvamedha and Rājasūya, doing well? Are his queens keeping fit? Is the Kosala kingdom of hoary tradition enjoying its deserved glory? Is its populace happy? Now, why is it you are in such a condition? Why are you not clad in your kingly robes? I know you are the embodiment of dutifulness. But I see some deep sorrow in your mien. Tell me all your troubles. I shall do my best to set your mind at rest."

SAD NEWS

Bharata's heart melted at Rāma's words. He could see in Rāma the living spirit of their father.

Bharata said: "Brother, our father died soon after you left Ayodhya." No sooner than these words came out of Bharata's lips, Rāma fell to the ground like ■ tree uprooted in ■ cyclone.

Rāma was speechless, learning that the father who brought him up with such tender care was no more. Lakṣmaṇa was also similarly affected. Rāma was simply staring at Bharata with unspeakable sorrow. Then Bharata told Rāma: "Brother, I hadn't the good fortune to be at our father's side when he passed away. My mother alone is responsible for his sudden death. He died uttering your name." Rāma embraced his three younger brothers and they all wept together for a while. Sītā also was shedding tears; she was sorry she could not serve her parents-in-law. Vasiṣṭha and Sumantra consoled them. Then Rāma told Vasiṣṭha: "Revered sir, it was the irony of fate that I could not even perform my father's last rites. Anyway there is no need to blame anyone. All this was predestined. My aunt Kaikeyī herself is only an instrument in the hands of Fate. I hoped that I could serve my father after completing my exile. Lakṣmaṇa also thought so. However, Bharata was quite fit to perform the last rites. Now, kindly make all the arrangements on the banks of the Mandākinī for us to perform the rites on our part. Thereby Lakṣmaṇa and I also shall repay the debt we owe for our existence to our father."

Then Bharata told Rāma: "Brother, all of us the scions of Ikṣvāku abide by the tradition of our clan. Being the eldest son, you have been from birth the rightful heir to the Kosala throne. I have come here to tell you that I have no right to rule the kingdom and to request you to return to Ayodhyā. I thought, if my unaided word would not carry weight, all these representatives of Ayodhyā life could convince you. So I brought along with me all these good people. If I cannot still persuade you, kindly allow me to serve you here these fourteen years; or else let me cut my throat and fling my head at your feet so that I may attain instant salvation; or, if you prefer, let Śatrughna be entrusted with the rulership of Kosala. I am much determined to stand by my principles as you are in keeping your word. Must the welfare of our people and the good name of our clan be sacrificed because of the whim of a thoughtless woman? Please decide for yourself what is for the good of all."

Both Lakṣmaṇa and Śatrughna were delighted with the self-sacrificing spirit of Bharata, but expressed their inability to shoulder the responsibility of kingship. As for Rāma, his first

allegiance was to his father, but he could not at the same time bear the thought of displeasing his people.

As this conversation among the brothers was going on, Vasiṣṭha made the arrangements on the banks of Mandākinī for Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to offer the last rites to their father. While offering the oblations, Rāma prayed to Daśaratha and other forefathers in these words: "O mighty forbears, to you who have handed down to me the great kingdom of Kosala I can never adequately repay my debt. I can only hope and pray that with this solemn offering of sacred waters your souls will enjoy everlasting peace. Father, both Lakṣmaṇa and I regret our misfortune of not being able to do these last rites in the first instance, and are also sorry that we can only offer you oblations made of cheap flour. But, sir, you know that I am in these humble surroundings only to honour your command. Now bless us all the four brothers that we may always live together united in thought and purpose. May we not do anything to besmirch the Ikṣvāku escutcheon."

After performing the last rites, they returned to the cottage. Sitting together, the brothers were once again overwhelmed with grief for their departed father. Their lamentation was so moving that even the flora and fauna seemed to shed tears in sympathy, and so loudly heart-rending, as to be heard by the rest of Bharata's party. Even as Vasiṣṭha was going back to escort the queens to the cottage, they met him midway. As they saw the sage, they broke into wild sobbing. Vasiṣṭha was touched by this expression of the people's sympathy for Daśaratha's children. Walking along with the golden palanquin in which the queens were seated, he told Kausalyā: "Revered lady, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa just now paid their last respects to their father on the banks of this holy Mandākinī river." On seeing the oblations left for the departed souls, the elder queen was much affected, and, falling on the shoulders of Sumitra cried out: "Sister, how sad it is that my son Rāma has to subsist on such cheap food and had to make this humble offering to the great fore-fathers of his! Oh how unfortunate it is that the same child whom I cradled in golden hammocks had to put up with the harsh life in the jungles!" Then Kausalyā thanked the river that offered drinking waters to Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. The river goddess, on her part, felt herself lucky to have the mother of Rāma tread her banks. The mount

Citrakūṭa, which formerly was made tender with the touch of the feet of Rāma and Sītā, now seemed to acquire greater mellowness as Kausalyā set foot on its terrain.

Reaching the cottage, Kausalyā embraced Rāma and said: "Child, you have lost your father. And you are even further tested by fate through this exile. Oh, what happened to your tender tresses? You who were wearing silken robes, must you now be contented with putting on rough deerskin on your tender frame? Should you be satisfied with food made of lowly flour? Has Citrakūṭa to take the place of Ayodhyā for you? Oh, Rāma, I cannot survive this sight of your distress. I want to join my dear husband in heaven. You are fortunate in having a wife like Sītā and brothers like Bharata, Lakṣmaṇa and Śatrughna. May your fame last for ever ■ the diadem of Ikṣvāku dynasty!" Hearing these heartbreaking words, Rāma was very much saddened.

Then Kausalyā turned to Sītā and said: "Dear princess! Alas, that the darling daughter of mighty Janaka should suffer such trials and tribulations! But how dutiful you are in standing by your spouse through thick and thin! I ■ lucky in having such ■ exemplary daughter-in-law." Sītā was touched by this tribute and thanked her.

Rāma said to Kaikeyī, "Mother, I ■ always grateful to you for having all along treated me like your own son Bharata. It is my bounden duty to respect your wishes. Some mysterious force has entered your mind and guided your decision. You are not at all to blame for my exile."

Kaikeyī then regretted her folly. Looking on him ■ someone as dear ■ her own son, she was even more struck by Rāma's ability to treat foe and friend alike. All the gathering admired Rāma's magnanimity.

Then Sumitrā told Rāma: "Rāma, I ■ proud of my son Lakṣmaṇa who has dedicated his whole life to your service. You ■ his lord and master. I know you were born for a divine purpose, and, in being by your side, Lakṣmaṇa also has ■ equally purposeful existence. May your mutual love be an example to all brothers of the world." Rāma was gratified by these words.

Then Bharata told Rāma in the presence of Vasiṣṭha, Sumantra and other notables: "Brother, all these noble friends of ours have been our well-wishers even from the time of our great departed father. These wise men also join me in wishing your return to Ayodhyā. Do not disappoint us, and rule us as you only are capable of ruling us."

Rāma was submerged in thought. If he were to accept their advice he would have to forsake his sworn duty and would be a traitor to his father's wishes. As his sense of duty was higher than his momentary weakness for pleasing his friends and relatives, he turned to Bharata and said: "Bharata, I do admire your spirit of self-sacrifice and your regard for me. But don't you realize that our father had unquestionable rights over his children as much as over his people? Whether it was his own wish or that prompted by his solemn promise to his spouse, King Daśaratha expressed his command, and I have no choice but to honour it."

Bharata was dejected at Rāma's resolve. He realized it was impossible to lead Rāma away from his sworn allegiance to filial duty. He and his followers rested for the night, but it was getting late. They had not much hope of Rāma's immediate return to Ayodhyā. They were afraid of the possible consequence, and were worried about the fate of Bharata. They spent a restless night.

Next morning they again gathered around Rāma. Among the callers were Vasiṣṭha, Sumantra and Jābāli.

Bharata told Rāma: "Brother, you have fulfilled Kaikeyī's wish. Now it is my turn to offer you Ayodhyā. You may rule the kingdom of Kosala as you like. Is it right that your servant rule it while you are alive? All the people rely on you; you alone are fit to be their king. If you disappoint us, our predicament will be like that of the man who sows a seed, sees it grow into a big tree, and then finds it rotting and dying just when it is expected to bear fruit. Finally, I beg of you to note that I cannot live, away from you."

THE WAY OF NATURE

Rāma advised Bharata thus: "Brother, don't you know that all men are mortal? You must not grieve either for your father's

death, for he went the way all of ■■■ should travel, or for the separation from me, for we two are like ships passing each other in the darkness of night. Like the great rivers mingling in the mighty ocean, losing their individual identity, all of us mortals find death levelling us. None of us is essentially inferior or superior to one another. It is the duty of a brave man to face up to life's challenges with strength and fortitude. Our father was an exemplary hero. We must be worthy of his tradition, and honour his commands."

Bharata replied: "You are the wisest man in all the three worlds. There is nothing in the laws of men or gods with which you ■■■ not acquainted. Must you sacrifice the good of the people who trust you to the understandable folly of a momentarily weak father? I agree that he was a great man, but in this single instance he was misled. And such a man ■■■ you, who is capable of setting right his wrong, must not fritter away his powers in idle exile. What justification could be there for this neglect?"

Rāma was quite touched by the repeated pleas of Bharata, but he could not swerve from the path of duty. He thought: "How admirably adamant is Bharata! Is God testing me by sending this beloved brother to tempt me away from my sacred resolve? No, I cannot accede to his wish. Nor would I obey my father even if he comes back alive and changes his mind, for his promise to Kaikeyī is sacred and I must honour it at all costs. I value Truth more than the kingship of all the world."

STRANGE COUNSEL

Jābāli, an old ascetic and friend of Daśaratha, then told Rāma: "Prince, I ■■■ really amused at seeing the people of this world worrying about preserving noble traditions in the hope of enjoying some unknown otherworldly bliss. Such people forsake the present comfort for ■■■ unknown future felicity. It is true that ■■■ selfish priests wrote in the scriptures that ■■■ must perform rites and sacrifices in this world in order to attain beatitude in the next world. But you, Rāma, you are ■ wise man. You need not set much store by such vague promises of visionaries. If you kick away the rulership of Kosala, your act can be likened to that of ■ ■■■ who throws away the diamond in the hand and ■■■ after a brittle

glass piece. So forget all this talk of Duty and otherworldly concern, and accept the humble demand of Bharata and the others."

Rāma was taken aback at this foul advice. He knew that Jābāli was a well-wisher of his family, but he could not understand why the wise man should utter such blasphemy. He was prepared to put up with any amount of pain in the discharge of his duty.

REJOINDER

Rāma replied Jābāli: "Revered sage, I have great respect for you. I suppose you spoke like this out of thoughtless love for me. Otherwise saints like you would never stoop to such wicked counsel. If I myself neglect the dictates of my conscience and stray from the path of righteousness, the whole kingdom would be a prey to anarchy. Men may be divided into the lucky and the unlucky, the good and the bad, the just and the unjust. But the honest people do not need to follow the example of the dishonest, attracted by momentary gain. You know that the way to Heaven is paved with good works such as speaking the truth, doing one's duty, non-violence in thought, word and deed, kindness to all living creatures and large-hearted acts of hospitality and self-sacrifice. I firmly believe in such a higher world, and I cannot appreciate any talk of disbelief in it. My father was mistaken in treating you like his friend."

Jābāli contritely replied: "Dear Rāma, forgive me. I am not really an atheist. I spoke like that merely to serve the immediate purpose of pleasing Bharata and seeing you back home. I knew all the time that you would not follow my false advice."

Then Vasiṣṭha told Rāma: "Prince, it warms the cockles of my heart to note your love of duty and righteousness. I do admit that you are right in strictly obeying the injunctions of your elders and ancestors. But you know I have only the good of your family at heart. I think you will not be guilty of any misdeed if you now honour the wishes of all of us who have come to request you to return to Ayodhyā. For, your father granted Kaikeyī's wishes against his will, and now Kaikeyī herself is willing to retract. and

she repents her thoughtless act. Bharata, as you see, is not prepared to respect his mother's unworthy wishes, and he wants to return to you what he has obtained for himself through his mother's folly. So, if only not to disappoint the whole populace, to please whom is your first duty, you must consent to return with us."

Bowing to the sage respectfully, Rāma replied: "Revered sage, kindly do not lead me away from the path of rectitude. If I forsake my vow of Truth I would be a living corpse. Right or wrong, willingly or unwillingly, my father has given his solemn promise to Kaikeyī and it must be kept at any cost. My father wanted me to go into exile, and Bharata to rule till I return home. Since a father's command is irrevocable and must be obeyed above that of others, my decision is final."

Bharata was shedding ceaseless tears. Seeing him in such a state, his entourage also started weeping. Bharata gathered *Kuśa* grass and laying it before the cottage laid himself down on it. Addressing his brother from that position, he said: "Rāma, I do not want the kingdom which you do not rule. I am prepared to fast unto death. If while I am alive you will not rule Kosala, I have no choice but to join our father in heaven."

ADMONITION

Rāma chided Bharata thus: "Bharata, you must realize that you have no right to fast like this. Such a vow can be taken only by saints and sages. As a member of the warrior race (Kṣatriya), you will only be untrue to your apportioned duty if you act this way. You will not only be unable to please the souls of our ancestors but will also bring disgrace to our very dynasty. If you want to live you have to accept the reign of Kosala."

Bharata was broken-hearted. Everyone around saw the hopelessness of the situation.

Then Vasiṣṭha said: "Rāma, you are the greatest of men. Neither your vow nor Bharata's good name must be compromised. So I suggest that Bharata rule Kosala as your representative during these fourteen years. Just promise him that you will surely come

back to Ayodhyā after that period and relieve him of his responsibilities."

Rāma bowed to the sage's feet and readily agreed to his advice. Bharata also had no option but to accept the counsel of the revered preceptor.

Bharata ordered that a pair of golden sandals be brought. Touching them reverently with his eyes, he himself helped Rāma to put them on. Tears of joy from Bharata's eyes fell on Rāma's feet. Similarly Rāma's ecstatic tears dropped on Bharata's head. The gods in heaven showered flowers on them blessing them and wishing them, as well as Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, constant success. The whole gathering cheered the royal people wildly. Kausalyā, Sumitrā, Kaikeyī and Sītā too shed tears of rapture. Lakṣmaṇa was immensely pleased with Bharata's love of Rāma. He was also inwardly gratified at Rāma's righteous resolve. The four brothers embraced one another. The three queens took Sītā in their arms and blessed her. Vasiṣṭha and other sages, and Sumantra and other ministers, congratulated Rāma on his unswerving allegiance to Truth and Duty. They all took their leave of Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā. Bharata told Rāma that he himself would not ascend the Ikṣvāku throne but would place Rāma's golden sandals on it and would act only ■ Rāma's nominal representative. He also said that he would live away from the pomp of Ayodhyā in the neighbouring village of Nandigrāma and would visit the city only when his duties ■ Rāma's representative call him there. He concluded that all the time he would be praying for the return of Rāma and would survive merely in the hope of seeing him seated on the Ikṣvāku throne.

Rāma and Sītā blessed Bharata. Bharata and Śatrughna reluctantly took their leave of Lakṣmaṇa. Sumitra and Kaikeyī blessed Rāma that his fame might live for ever.

Embracing him, Kausalyā said: "Rāma, how can I bring myself to go back to Ayodhyā unaccompanied by you? I feel that my end is quickly approaching. Your father died in your absence. Is it fated that I too must leave this world without having you by my side? I hope not. I wish you would grant that you will be near me when I die and perform my last rites yourself. That is all ■ seek from you, for ■ know you will not agree to my staying here with

you—as that will be dishonouring Bharata. I do not want to bother you any more. I can see Bharata in you, you in Bharata. I shall somehow manage to live through these fourteen years in the fond hope of seeing you again at the end. I once again wish you peace, safety and happiness in this exile. Please take care of yourself, your wife and your brother. Oh how wretched I am that I should leave you thus in the jungle!”

Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa bowed to Kausalyā’s feet. Then they similarly saluted Sumitrā, Kaikeyī and Vasiṣṭha.

RETURN JOURNEY

Bharata’s retinue was getting ready to return to Ayodhyā. Bharata placed Rāma’s shoes on a silver platter and carried them on his head. Seeing Bharata’s act, Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were deeply moved. Rāma was speechless with grief. So was Bharata. They bade their mutual final farewell with mere lingering looks. Bharata’s party was chanting the name of Rāma; the sounds seemed to rock the Citrakūṭa mountain. Mandākinī appeared to stir restlessly in a loud lament. The blossoming buds faded and dropped to the ground. Both birds and beasts were shedding tears and bidding farewell to Bharata. As his army and the rest of the party followed him silently, the tearful Bharata started back on his homeward journey, with bowed head, his mind full of Rāma.

Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were longingly gazing at the returning travellers as far as their eyes could see. They were particularly distressed that they had to part from the venerable old queen Kausalyā. Their cottage seemed to be lifeless.

Bharata and party reached Bharadvāja’s hermitage. As the sage already knew what transpired at Citrakūṭa, thanks to his clairvoyance, he said to Bharata: “Prince, you are a noble and dutiful man. You have agreed to obey your elder brother’s command, and in doing so proved your worth as the heir to a noble clan and tradition. Please rest assured that Rāma will come back and rule Kosala at the end of the exile period. Then you will be able to feast your eyes on the sight of Rāma’s wearing the diamond-studded crown and ruling the people with truth and justice.”

Bharata thanked the sage for his kind words, and took his departure.

Learning about Bharata's coming back, Guha sent some of his boatmen and arranged for the party's crossing the Gaṅgā. Gaṅgā was again highly gratified at the royal party's arrival. Still keeping Rāma's sandals on his head, Bharata reached the other bank. Guha greeted him with royal honours, and bowed to Rāma's footwear. He felt the presence of Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa before his eyes, and tears of happiness rolled down his cheeks. The sandals of Rāma seemed to become tender at the touch of his devotee Guha. He prayed: "Rāma, your lotus feet are my constant refuge. I am awaiting the blessed day when you will take me into your eternal soul."

Bharata was touched by Guha's prayer and embraced him with tears in his eyes. Guha consoled him. After accepting the hospitality of the tribal king, Bharata and party again proceeded on their journey to Ayodhyā.

The news that Bharata could manage to bring back only Rāma's sandals reached Ayodhyā before the party actually arrived there. The people, who were eagerly looking forward to seeing Rāma, were much disappointed. The city wore a forlorn look; the citizens quietly waited to give Bharata the welcome back home.

Bharata and his entourage reached the outskirts of Ayodhyā. He felt that the whole kingdom was nearly lifeless. With the sandals still on his head, Bharata alighted from the chariot, and when he entered the city, the people stood respectfully on both sides of the street. Seeing Rāma's sandals, they cheered: "Long live Rāma! Long live Bharata!"

Bharata placed Rāma's sandals on the Ikṣvāku throne inside Daśaratha's palace. The next day the sandals were coronated. Bharata told the assembly, which gathered to witness the ceremony: "Great citizens of Ayodhyā, Rāma allowed me to use his footwear as his representative. He will come back after fourteen years and rule you. Till then I will do my best to represent him dutifully. I shall visit Ayodhyā whenever duty calls me here, but I shall lead a simple life in a cottage in the nearby village,

Nandigrāma. ■ shall convey all your representations to the golden sandals before coming to ■ decision." Hearing those words the sandals seemed to smile-which fact, however, neither Bharata nor the courtiers could observe. The citizens praised Bharata's brotherly love and self-sacrificing spirit.

After Bharata and party left Citrakūṭa, the sages there learnt that the carnivorous demon Khara would raid that region and harass them. So they resolved upon leaving the place. They asked Rāma also to accompany them, but Rāma did not like to leave the quiet Citrakūṭa.

Now Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were all by themselves on the mountain. After ■ few days they felt that the place lost its natural dignity and splendour with the departure of the saints, and wanted to shift to the nearby region where sage Atri has his hermitage. That night Rāma saw in ■ dream the personified mount Citrakūṭa supplicating: "Rāma, you who have sanctified me with the dust of your feet, must you now leave me? I promised the Ayodhyā citizens that I would look after you all these fourteen years. If either Bharata or the citizens again come to visit you here what reply can I give them if you leave me?" Similarly river Mandākinī seemed to wail: "I became holier by your arrival. I took refuge in you who are the refuge of all mankind. Is it fair that you must now go away from my banks?" Rāma was moved to tears. He expressed his gratitude to both the mountain and the river. He told them that he had to leave the place in order to protect the gentle saints and punish the wicked demons who were pestering them, elsewhere.

The next morning they reluctantly left the place where they spent some of their most peaceful days, taking their leave of the mountain, the river and the cottage with the ~~sort~~ sort of grief that ordinarily mortals display at parting from their dear ones.

THE SAINTLY LADY

They reached the hermitage of sage Atri on the banks of Gaṅgā. The sage Atri and his lifemate Anasūyā are holy ascetics. Entering the cottage, Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa bowed to the

saint's feet. He was delighted at their arrival and after duly greeting them in welcome, led them to the interior where Anasūyā was seated. Despite her old age, grey hairs and wizened features, she was shining with divine brightness. It was she who by virtue of her powerfully splendid chastity that could drive away ■ ten-year-old famine and could also save the hermits from the onslaught of demons. She once made children-in-arms of the Trinity, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, who came to test her chastity; only after their respective wives prayed for her mercy did she hand back the gods their original features.

Pleasantly struck at the marvellous splendour of the lady's visage, the royal visitors saluted her on bended knees. She blessed them duly. Taking Sītā in her arms and then, placing her in her lap, Anasūyā said: "Beloved princess, you are very fortunate in having Rāma for your husband, and Lakṣmaṇa for your brother-in-law. You did the right thing in following your husband. All the pomp and pageantry of the world is transitory. A woman's place is always by her husband—be he good or bad." So saying, she caressed Sītā's tresses. Sītā shed tears of joy. She was reminded of her wise father's counsel. Nor did she forget the advice of her parents-in-law. She replied: "Holy Mother, I do not know who my own mother is, but I now look upon you as one. The love you bestowed on me is matchless. My husband, ■ you know, is the embodiment of all virtues. He loves his step-mothers ■ his own mother, and to please me is his main concern. For my part I will stand by him even ■ Sāvitrī did."

Anasūyā's heart melted, and she commiserated with Sītā's troubles in accompanying Rāma into the forest. The noble lady said: "Child, God will surely protect you. Now please seek whatever favour you wish from me. You will get it without fail." Sītā could not think of any: what more did she want than that she should always be by her husband's side? She politely replied she had no favour to seek.

Anasūyā was even further pleased with this dignified and honest reply. Of her own free will she presented the princess with silken garments and golden ornaments. Besides, she placed ■■ unfading garland around her neck and smeared her with a powder that would never lose its perfume (all these embellishments had

the divine charm of keeping Sītā look young and beautiful in the eyes of Rāma, even when she is otherwise weak or emaciated through fasting and grief). She then heard the story of Sītā's *Svayamvara* (choosing of ■ husband by ■ woman from among many suitors) from her own lips, and was enraptured.

At Anasūyā's request Sītā put on all the jewellery. Seeing her thus, Atri and Anasūyā felt that their existence was hallowed. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were delighted that Sītā could obtain such favours from Anasūyā. Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa stayed there for the night.

Waking up early next morning, and finishing their bath and repast, they again received the blessings of the holy couple.

ARANYA KĀṆḌA

After passing some distance through the wild Daṇḍaka forest, Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmana approached a hermitage. There were to be seen tall trees with succulent fruits and beautiful plants with fragrant flowers. The lakes nearby were lovely to look at, with charming lotuses. Some sages were chanting Vedic hymns and performing their sacrificial rites with deep dedication.

Seeing the visitors, the sages went forward and welcomed them with due solemnity, affection and regard. Besides the saints, even the flora and fauna seemed to be welcomingly impressed by the divine simplicity and splendour in the bearing of Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa.

Addressing Śrī Rāma, the sages said: “Rāma, you who are the personification of *Dharma*, you are worthy of our worship. Whether you are at Ayodhyā or in Daṇḍaka you remain our king. We feel sanctified by seeing you. Our sole wealth is our penance. Here are some demons who are bent on disturbing our prayers. Kindly stay on here and save ■ from their onslaught.”

Rāma assured them: “Revered sages, please set your minds at rest; from now on no harm will come to you from any quarter.” The sages were reassured. Resting in the hermitage there for the night, Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmana left the next morning for ■ place nearby. Wherever they went they noticed that the jungle was full of wild beasts.

KILLING OF VIRĀḌHA

A mountain-like demon was approaching them, bellowing fiercely. Sītā was terribly frightened. Rāma and Lakṣmana too saw him, but before they could make any move the angry demon caught hold of Sītā and lifted her up on to his shoulders. Sītā was severely shocked and was supplicatingly staring at Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. The princes were getting ready to punish the wild Rākṣasa.

Scoffing at the princes, the demon said: "You false saints, so you needed the company of a woman! I am the son of a real sage. My name is Virādha. I have obtained ■ boon from Brahmā that no weapon might kill me. With this weapon I have in my hand I have killed many a human being and feasted on their flesh and blood; you too will meet the same fate if you do not leave this woman with me and if you try to resist me."

The angered Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa then struck him with their sharp arrows. Although his whole body was wounded and bloodied, the demon did not die. He put down Sītā and approached the brothers. Then they hit him with the fire weapon (*Agneya astra*) but in vain. In his turn the demon hurled a spear at the princes; Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa broke it into two with their arrows. Then Virādha bodily lifted the princes and began to run amuck. Sītā was highly frightened at that sight; she wailed at the thought of living without her Rāma. Taking pity on her, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa cut the two arms of the demon. Virādha fell to the ground, but he did not yet die.

Then Rāma told Lakṣmaṇa: "Brother, bury this fellow under the ground. In that manner alone will he meet his death."

At that juncture Virādha was released from his demoniac form and became angelic figure. He spoke: "Rāma, forgive me for not recognising you in the first instance. Here I offer you my respectful salutations. In my former existence I was ■ Gandharva named Tumbura. As I forgot my special responsibilities in my passionate attachment to the heavenly damsel, Rambha, I was cursed by the lord of the gods, Indra, to become a Rākshasa (demon). When I repentantly fell at his feet and asked him for a way out of the curse, he said that I would regain my original form after ■■ encounter with Rāma in the Daṇḍaka forest. So here I am ■ reborn Gandharva, thanks to you. I again beg your pardon for trying to molest Sītā. I salute you and your brave brother once more. A little distance from here is the hermitage of Śarabhangu; he is a great sage; he is expecting you. Please call on him. Now, I take my leave of you gratefully and go back to my heavenly abode."

The royal party was pleased with Tumburu's words, and following his advice went up to Śarabhaṅga, the great saint who already realized communion with the Absolute. Leaving Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa at the gate, Rāma entered the hermitage. The sage was overjoyed at Rāma's arrival. Rāma then beckoned to Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa to get in. The three bowed to the sage. Offering them due hospitality, Śarabhaṅga said: "Rāma, your arrival is a matter of great satisfaction to all of us hermits here. We thank you for killing the cruel Virādha and pray for your lifelong success and prosperity. Just now Indra called on me to take me to *Brahma Loka* (the highest heaven). But as I knew you were to come here, I told him I would not leave this place till I saw you. I am now immensely gratified that I could at last see you with my own eyes. You may treat this hermitage as your own. You are welcome to stay here as long as you like. You will not be in want of anything here."

Rāma thanked him for his hospitality, but said that, since he has to move about from place to place in his duty of protecting the good people and punishing the wicked, he would be leaving for the hermitage of Sutikṣṇa. Śarabhaṅga said "very well", and entered the sacrificial fire, thereby enabling himself to go to *Brahma Loka*.

Sage Sutikṣṇa is a great ascetic. Engrossed in his penance, he took no care of his physical appearance: his body was filled with dust and his hair was matted. Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa bowed to him. The ascetic offered them his hospitality and expressed his joy at seeing them. He ceded the fruits of his penance to Rāma. On learning from the sage that the place was infested with wild beasts, Rāma aimed his bow. On hearing the sound of Rāma's bow, the beasts found their spirits flying away and they fled the place. The sage was pleased with Rāma's good deed.

A doubt entered Sītā's mind. As she saw Rāma receiving the blessings of the saints, and obliging them with the killing of the demons and the wild animals, she wondered whether it was fair on his part to kill the people who have not caused any direct harm to him. For a moment she was afraid that some sort of retribution would befall Rāma. But on second thoughts she realized how foolish she was—for was it not the self-imposed duty of her divine husband to save the virtuous from the onslaughts of the sinful people and wicked beasts?

Thus obtaining blessings of the sages and wandering in the vicinity of the lovely regions of Daṇḍaka forest, the exiles spent ten years. At that juncture Rāma returned to Sūtīkṣṇa and asked him to point out the place where sage Agastya was living. Sūtīkṣṇa gladly directed him southwards

VĀTĀPI "DIGESTED"

In the Daṇḍaka forest there were two demons named Ilvala and Vātāpi. The latter somehow obtained a boon from God that no weapon could kill him; the former puts on a Brahmin's garb and invites the sages in the vicinity to be his guests at "the ceremony he observes on the death anniversary of his forefathers." Since it is not in the saintly tradition to refuse such ■ request, they fall in with his wishes. On each occasion Ilvala invites ■ Brahmin to his abode. There Vātāpi appears in the shape of ■ goat. Ilvala cuts him and cooks his flesh, which is served as food for the guest.

The guileless guest eats the meat (as was the custom on such ■ ceremonial occasion). After a while, Ilvala cries out "Vātāpi", on hearing which Vātāpi comes out alive tearing away the stomach of the guest. Naturally the guest dies, and both the demons thereupon feast themselves on his flesh. Thus several innocent sages met their death.

Sage Agastya heard about this happening. He ■ no ordinary sage; thanks to his great penance, he obtained supreme powers. Ignorant of this fact, one day Ilvala invited Agastya ■ his home. By virtue of his clairvoyance, the sage foresaw what ■ to follow; but accepted the invitation. As usual, Ilvala fed him with the cooked pieces of Vātāpi's flesh. Agastya ate them, at the same time saying a prayer to Lord Vināyaka, the killer of all Evil. The prayer enabled the sage to digest Vātāpi in full. When Ilvala called for Vātāpi, there' ■ response. The sage said that he "digested" the demon:

*Kuto niṣkrāmitum śaktiḥ, mayā jīrṇasya rākṣasaḥ.
Bhrātuḥ te Meṣarūpasya gatasya yamasādanam.*

As the angered Ilvala tried to kill the sage, Agastya caused him to be burnt by the fire of his divine anger. This news spread all over the Daṇḍaka forest, and the frightened demons began fleeing the place.

This is the same Agastya who performed the wedding of the divine couple Śiva and Pārvatī. This is the same Agastya who cursed King Nahuṣa to be dethroned and to be turned into a snake. This is the same Agastya who shamed Mount Vindhya when the latter came in the way of the Sun-god's progress. Rāma thought it was right to be blessed by such a mighty saint, and all the three exiles proceeded towards his hermitage.

On the way they spent a night in the hermitage of Agastya's brother. Reaching Agastya's abode, Rāma sent word through Lakṣmaṇa. Lakṣmaṇa asked a disciple of Agastya to inform the sage that Sītā and Rāma were waiting outside to meet him. Agastya was highly pleased and asked him to bring in the blessed couple. The three bowed to Agastya's feet. Tears of joy dropped from the saint's eyes. Seeing him, the brothers were reminded of their father, and Sītā was reminded of King Janaka. They were boundlessly delighted.

Agastya said: "Rama, I have been awaiting your arrival all these days. By the touch of your feet this whole region has become sanctified. Now, it is the saintly tradition to offer you hospitality only after I perform Vaiśvadeva (an oblation to all the elements)

*Rājā sarvasya lokasya, dharmacārī, mahārathaḥ,
Pūjanīyaśca mānyaśca, bhavān prāptaḥ priyatithiḥ*

"You are the lord of all the worlds, worshipped by all the peoples. You were born to increase the fame of your dynasty. Your father was a great friend of mine. It is right that Sītā should have followed you. She is a noble lady - quite unlike the average woman who is fickle-minded, pleasure-loving and selfish. She is really worthy of her heritage, being the foster-child of the great scion of the Moon Clan (Chandravamśa), Janaka. As for Lakṣmaṇa, he is the quintessence of brotherly love. So wherever you three tread, the place will be the home of good fortune. In our hermitage you will feel no want; you are welcome to spend the rest of your exile period here."

Rāma replied: "Revered sage we are indeed lucky in having met you. I have taken a vow to rid this forest of all vile elements and to keep the minds of the sages at rest. So forgive me for not accepting your kind offer. Please show **■** some place centrally located, so that I can go about my mission with promptness."

Then Agastya said: "Prince, your mission is really praiseworthy. the region that best suits your purpose is not far from here. It is called *Pañcavaṭī*, a beautiful resort on the banks of river Godāvārī. Before leaving us, kindly accept these few gifts from me. They are the invincible bow and unexhausting arrows manufactured by the divine smith Viśvakarma. These will protect you for ever."

Bowing to the sage's feet, Rāma expressed his gratitude. Spending the night there, the next morning the exiles left for *Pañcavaṭī*.

PAÑCAVAṬĪ

On their way they saw **■** banyan tree. On its branches was an old vulture named Jaṭāyu. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa first mistook the bird for a demon in disguise. Jaṭāyu himself was greatly pleased to see them.

Jaṭāyu was an old friend of Daśaratha. In order to dispel the doubts of the princes, he began narrating his story. He told them that he was the nephew of Garuḍa (the divine vulture who carries Lord Viṣṇu **■** his back) and that he would be glad to accompany them if they had no objection. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa accepted his offer, and asked him to keep Sītā company while they go ahunting

Rāma and Jaṭāyu embraced each other, the one in his love for **■** old friend of his father and the other in his esteem for the divine incarnation. Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa were pleasantly struck with the devotion of Jaṭāyu and with Rāma's love for his devotees.

They then proceeded towards *Pañcavaṭī*—where the river Godāvārī was flowing at its widest and deepest on one side and on the other side green meadows with lotus-filled lakes were

providing a feast for the eyes. There the flora and fauna were flourishing in resplendent glory, and were in themselves a great sight of welcome to the visitors.

Immensely delighted at the natural splendour of the surroundings, Rāma asked Lakṣmaṇa to construct a cottage there. Taking Lakṣmaṇa in his arms, Rāma said: "You do everything for me out of pure love. I can repay you only with this fond embrace."

COTTAGE

Lakṣmaṇa felt that his whole existence was sanctified by that simple expression of Rāma's gratitude. Sītā was deeply touched by their mutual love. Lakṣmaṇa finished his task in right earnest, and on an auspicious day they all entered the cottage. Eating the roots and fruits of the forest, there they spent their time in comfort and with contentment. Thus autumn passed by and the comfortable Indian winter had come. The earth was flourishing with rich corn and paddy. The cows were yielding much milk. The birds were singing sweetly, and the whole atmosphere wore a look of love and joy. Sītā and Rāma were fascinated by their surroundings.

Reminded of Bharata, Lakṣmaṇa said, "Rāma, you live like an ascetic here; so does Bharata in Nandigrāma. Like you, he too leads an austere and unostentatious life, and is ruling the people as your representative. I can see the image of one of you in the other. How lucky I am to have you for my brothers! They say that as a rule the sons take after their mothers. But in the case of Bharata the rule is different; he resembles our father. In you both I can see the image of our father. Sītādevī appears to me like my own mother Sumitrā. And I can see King Janaka in her. I am greatly indebted to God for granting me the boon of serving you worthy couple."

Rāma was deeply moved, and replied: "Brother, what you say is true. However, Fate has separated us brothers. Oh when will we be reunited!" Hearing Rāma's wistful words, Lakṣmaṇa shed tears. Sītā witnessed the scene with silent admiration.

THE COMET FROM LANKĀ

On another occasion Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were quietly talking about the past incidents in Ayodhyā, after finishing their

daily duties. At that juncture there arrived Śūrpaṅakhā, the sister of Rāvaṇa. She was terribly ugly: her eyes were fiery and bloodshot; her hair was wiry and copper-hued; her voice was harsh; she was the embodiment of evil.

Seeing the divine figure of Rāma, engaged in tender conversation with Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, she fell wildly in love with him. Shamelessly she addressed Rāma: "Well, sweetheart, who are you? You look like an ascetic, but you have a woman with you. This is strange. I suppose she is your wife. On the other hand, the bows and arrows you have denote that you belong to the warrior race. What is the secret of all this? What brought you to this wild jungle? Tell me the truth."

Rāma told his story completely, and introduced to her Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa. As soon as she saw the witch, Sītā was terrified. Lakṣmaṇa knew Śūrpaṅakhā was a dangerous creature and was on his guard.

Śūrpaṅakhā was caught in the flames of lust. Such a one would never know peace of mind till the desire is fulfilled and would not be able to discriminate between right and wrong. Otherwise how would ■ Rākṣasa woman dare stand fearlessly before these divine people? How would she venture to seek the company of Rāma who has his wife beside him? Oh, how inexorable is the power of Cupid! He could even mislead Lord Śiva.

Śūrpaṅakhā said: "Rāma! the King of Laṅkā Rāvaṇa, is my elder brother. Kumbhakarṇa, Vibhiṣaṇa, Khara and Dūṣaṇa are my younger brothers. They are all unconquerable heroes. As for me, I, who am known as "Śūrpaṅakhā", have the power of assuming any form I choose. I roam about this forest like ■ free spirit and every living creature here is afraid of me and obeys my commands. Now, I tell you plainly that your good looks have enchanted me. I love you, I need you. Make me yours. This weakling Sītā is no fit mate for you; I am well-versed in the arts of love-making, and ■ will make you ecstatically happy."

Sītā was cut to the quick at these words. She knew that her husband had ■ place in his heart for any other woman than

herself. She was praying to God lest no harm come to them on account of this devilish woman. Lakṣmaṇa was furious. How could this maniac dare separate Rāma and Sītā? How could she visualise such ■ separation? He checked himself out of respect for Rāma: else he would have killed Śūrpaṇakhā rightaway.

Rāma was bewildered. He was devoted to one woman and he gave his word to Janaka that he would never do anything to wound his daughter's feelings. Being fundamentally good-natured, he could not rudely repel Śūrpaṇakhā's advances. Wondering whether this was a test of his integrity as well as of his chivalry, he politely told Śūrpaṇakhā: "Mother, I am sacredly devoted to a single woman, to my wedded wife. We were married in the presence of Lord Agni, and our vows are irrevocable. She belongs to the noble Lunar clan and I belong to the great Sōlar dynasty. We cannot stray from the path of righteousness. Besides, I ■■■ an ordinary human being and you come of the *Rākṣasa* stock. How can you have me?"

Sītā was much impressed by her husband's words. Her love for this great man was redoubled. Lakṣmaṇa thought that Rāma's words were nectar-like.

But Śūrpaṇakhā was uncontrollably offended by Rāma's speech. She thought that the only way to obtain the love of Rāma was through making him spouseless, and to that end she tried to kill Sītā. Rāma stopped her, but did not kill her because it was against his code to kill a woman unless that ■■■ the only way of removing evil. So he advised Lakṣmaṇa to cut Śūrpaṇakhā's ■■■ and ears. Thwarted and insulted, and stopping the blood from flowing into her mouth, Śūrpaṇakhā ■■■ away from that place. Rāma embraced and consoled Sītā. Lakṣmaṇa was carefully watching the retreating Śūrpaṇakhā.

THE END OF KHARA AND DŪṢAṆA

Bent upon taking revenge ■■■ the exiles for the injury they caused her, Śūrpaṇakhā approached her brother Khara. Seeing her plight, Khara asked her who ■■■ responsible for it and promised her to punish her attackers. Covering up her own evil

intention and act, she told him that, instigated by a woman, two ordinary human beings injured and insulted her. She added that the two men took the vow of extirpating the Rākṣasa race and that, unless he killed the brothers, she would commit suicide in his very presence.

Khara sent some soldiers to kill Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa. But the army perished under Rāma's attack. Śūrpaṇakhā conveyed the news to Khara. Upon which, Khara himself, accompanied by a larger force, went to fight with Rāma. On his way many bad omens appeared. But still, unaware of his certain doom, he proceeded on his futile mission.

At that moment, good omens appeared to Rāma. Instructing Lakṣmaṇa to escort Sītā to a safe corner of the cottage, Rāma got ready for the fight with great enthusiasm.

As Rāma aimed his bow, the resultant noise terrified the surrounding wild life. In order to witness the ensuing fight, the demigods formed into rows in the skies. Khara asked his charioteer to place the chariot directly in front of Rāma. Roaring like a lion, he set on Rāma with a shower of arrows. Rāma's arrows flew about on all sides and exterminated Khara's army. Khara took to his heels. Learning about his brother's defeat, Dūṣaṇa and his army went to battle with Rāma. They hurled mighty trees and big boulders at Rāma; but Rāma repulsed them easily with his arrows, which were interminable, thanks to Agastya's gift. Rāma took a hit at Dūṣaṇa's chest. Although blood oozed out, the Rākṣasa did not die. Therefore Rāma pounced on him and cut his shoulders. Dūṣaṇa died, and so did his army, at the hands of Rāma. Hearing of Dūṣaṇa's death, Khara came back to the fray in the company of Triśira. Triśira's three arrows hit Rāma's forehead and drew out blood. Rāma was extremely provoked and began to attack Khara all over his body. Khara's arrows were futile; his chariot broke down; so he took his mace and stood on the ground for further fight.

Then Rāma admonished him: "Those who are guided by the deadly sins and cause harm to innocent people like the hermits are doomed to perdition." Khara replied: "Rāma, don't lecture at me. Now save yourself." Saying that, he threw his mace at Rāma. Rāma cut the mace with his arrows and addressed the Rākṣasa:

"Khara, even now the vile egotism in you is not dead. You drank the blood of many innocent men. Now it is your turn to offer your blood to Mother Earth. Look up, all the gods in heaven are looking forward to your end. The time has come for the great sages to perform their rites without your interference." Rāma then used the weapons he obtained from Indra, and they caused the end of Khara. The heavenly inhabitants showered flowers on Rāma. The forest-dwellers gave their blessings to him. Lakṣmaṇa brought Sītā along with him and they both congratulated Rāma.

All the Rākṣasas in Janasthāna, except Kampana, died. Kampana conveyed the news to Rāvaṇa. The latter thundered: "Who is this scoundrel who killed my kith and kin? Doesn't he know that he has offended me, who am capable of killing all the gods and demigods of the whole universe? I can be the death of the God of Death; I can burn the God of Fire; I can bind the God of Air. How dare these exiles antagonise such ■ one ■ I?"

Then Kampana said tremblingly: "Lord, Rāma is no ordinary mortal. He is the eldest of King Daśaratha's sons, and his bravery is indescribable. He killed our people by the sheer superiority of his fighting strength."

Then Rāvaṇa asked: "Do you think the gods were aiding him?"

Kampana replied: "Rāma has his brother Lakṣmaṇa with him, who is his equal in bravery. When they both join in fighting the enemy it is like air joining forces with fire. They have also obtained some divinely-blessed weapons which make them all the more invincible. Rāma, with his arrows, can stem the tide of the seas and can cover the whole span of the skies. He has Sītā for his wife, a noble lady of unparalleled beauty. They are inseparables and ineffably in love with each other. If you can contrive to steal away Sītā, Rāma will feel the pangs of separation so badly that he will soon perish. Really, Sītā deserves to be in your harem, and Rāma, who killed our people, deserves such punishment."

Rāvaṇa's curiosity to see Sītā was aroused. Thinking that it was about time he took vengeance upon Rāma, he set out in his golden chariot, and before long reached the hermitage of the

Rākṣasa sage Mārīca. The latter welcomed him with due respect and asked the reason for his visit.

Pleased with Mārīca's hospitality, Rāvaṇa said: "You might know that Rāma is banished, in accordance with Kaikeyi's wish, by Daśaratha who formerly offered her two favours. Along with his brother Lakṣmaṇa, Rāma is now determined to wipe out our race from the face of the earth. Now, I am going to abduct his wife and hoping to cause his death eventually."

Interrupting him, Mārīca advised him: "Lord, it was some of your false friends misled you. You are the King of the Rākṣasas. Rāma is a noble human and is an invincible hero. You should not covet such a mighty person's wedded wife—not to speak of the folly of waging a fight with such a heroic person. Please go back to Laṅka and live contentedly and happily with your own women."

Rāvaṇa thought Mārīca's words were well-conceived. After all, Rāvaṇa is no fool. He is the genius and ascetic who obtained a boon from Brahmā that he could not meet his death at the hands of gods or demi-gods or angels. He thought he could not at all events be killed by ordinary humans. And so he felt assured that Rāma could not be a source of danger to him. Accordingly, he returned to Laṅkā.

PROVOCATIVE WORDS

Śūrpaṇakhā was still consumed with revengeful fire. She thought that Sītā was the cause of the injury she suffered at the hands of Lakṣmaṇa. So she decided upon finding some way of insulting and harming Sītā. She came up to her brother Rāvaṇa and tried to appeal to his natural lustfulness to steal Sītā away from Rāma.

At the moment Śūrpaṇakhā entered Rāvaṇa's palace he was engaged in a discussion with his ministers. Seeing Śūrpaṇakhā's disfigured face, he was heart-broken and asked her what was wrong.

Śūrpaṇakhā replied: "Brother, have you no messengers to bring you the news of the world? Don't you realize that you brought upon yourself the enmity not only of gods, demi-gods and

angels but also of humans? Has ■■■ one told you of the destruction of your kith and kin by Rāma? Are you just whiling away your time in your harem and forgetting the affairs of state? If so, please note your own people will soon cause you harm. If your sense of duty is not dead, now is the time for you to take revenge ■■■ Rāma."

Rāvaṇa heard her patiently, but he could not still forget the wise counsel of Mārīca. For would such ■ righteous person ■ Rāma kill the Rākṣasas, without proper reason? And Śūrpaṇakhā is a woman and older than Rāma. Would he insult her without provocation? All this was confusing to Rāvaṇa.

Śūrpaṇakhā did not reveal to him her own guilt, but told him that while she was trying to bring the beautiful Sītā as a gift to Rāvaṇa, she was thus injured by Rāma's brother Lakṣmaṇa. She told him, with greater emphasis, all that Kampana already informed him about the might of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, about the grace and charm of Sītā and about the mutual love of Rāma and Sītā. She further incited him that his life would be in vain without enjoying the love of Sītā and that in order to obtain her, he should kill Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa.

These words naturally provoked and excited Rāvaṇa. The craving for women robs a person of his ■■■ of proportion; thus Rāvaṇa had allowed himself to be ill-advised and to be led to his eventual downfall. He ordered his golden chariot to be got ready and set upon his evil mission. The gods in heaven told themselves that he was beginning his journey towards self-destruction.

THE GOLDEN DEER

At last the chariot of Rāvaṇa, reached Mārīca's hermitage. Seeing Rāvaṇa, the hermit realized that his end was approaching. However, fearing the mighty king's wrath, the hermit did him proper honours.

When Mārīca asked the reason for his visit, Rāvaṇa replied: "Mārīca, besides killing my people in Janasthāna, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa have causelessly insulted and injured my sister Śūrpaṇakhā. You formerly told me that Rāma was a man of righteous-

ness, but he proved himself to be the opposite. I will not spare him and his brother. They deserve the most severe punishment. That is why I have decided on stealing Rāma's wife, causing his slow death in his separation from his beloved lifemate. When Rāma dies, Lakṣmaṇa would naturally commit suicide. You know it is not wrong for us Rākṣasas to steal other people's wives. Now, I know you can assume any shape you like. So take the shape of a golden deer and roam about in the vicinity of Rāma's hermitage. As soon as she sees you, Sītā, prompted by her natural feminine curiosity, would request Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to catch you and to offer you as a gift to her. Then they would follow you in their effort to get hold of you. In their absence I shall snatch away Sītā and take her to Lankā. I cannot survive another day without enjoying the company of Sītā, for I am so passionately in love with her. If my act provokes Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to come and fight me, I can easily conquer them."

Mārica told himself that Rāvaṇa was indeed bent on virtua suicide. Still, he thought it was his duty to warn him finally.

*Sulabhāḥ puruṣā rājan satatam priyavādināḥ,
Apriyasya tu pathyasya vaktā śrotā ca durlabhāḥ.*

"You can easily find false advisers with honey-coated tongues. But it is hard to find a true friend who ventures to speak the unpleasant truth. You do not really know all about the valour of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. You seem to think that they are ordinary mortals. They are actually invincible and the offspring of a divine boon. You may take it that Sītā Dēvī is going to be your goddess of Death; else you wouldn't have been misguided like this. Besides, not only you but also the whole of your kingdom and I myself will perish if you try to fulfil your evil wish. I tell you you have been misinformed by your wily sister; for Rāma would never be unchivalrous to any one, let alone to a woman. He is the exemplary scion of the noble Ikṣvāku race, who has given up even his just claims to that kingdom in his wish to fulfil his father's command.

*"Rāmo vigrahavān dharmāḥ, sādhuḥ satyaparākramāḥ,
Rājā sarvasya lokasya, devānām maghavān iva.*

"Śūrpaṇakhā must have been guilty of some misdemeanour to have suffered that indignity. For you to try to separate Rāma and

Sītā is like attempting to divide the sun from sunlight. Rāma is like fire; don't play with that fire. Please consult your ministers, before challenging Rāma for a fight. I know from experience how powerful is the onslaught of Rāma's arrows: I had to run for my life when he was guarding Viśvāmitra's sacrificial rite; on another occasion when I went to gore him to death with my horns, after I assumed the form of a beast, he found out my evil intentions and drove me away with his mighty slings. Since then I have learnt my lesson and have taken to this ascetic life.

Rāvaṇa, I don't have to tell you how the innocent suffer in this world for the follies of the wicked. Would you sacrifice the whole of your Laṅkā for the sake of the inattainable Sītā?

Rāvaṇa was angered by this advice, because he was predestined to perish and he lost his sense of proportion and propriety. Mārīcā's counsel was like offering medicine to one already dying. Rāvaṇa shouted back: "Whom do you think you are? Just because I sought your help, do you think you could lecture me? You should have realized that you were speaking to a king, and even if you were right you should have couched your words in milder tones. Besides, you seem to be ignorant of the code of royalty. Rāma has killed your mother Tātakā and caused my sister much distress. Do you think a king like me would pocket such insults? Do you think Rāma was being righteous in injuring women? I would rather die than take all these insults lying down. Now then, you will see how I will abduct Sītā. If you do not accede to my request, I will kill you. So assume the form of a golden deer and play around Rāma's cottage. When Sītā sees you she will ask Rāma to fetch you for her. When Rāma tries to catch you, away from the sight of Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, you cry. "Oh Lakṣmaṇa, Oh Sītā", in the tones of Rāma's voice. Then, assuming Rāma is in danger, Sītā would send Lakṣmaṇa away to aid him. In the absence of the brothers I shall steal Sītā. You alone are capable of helping me in this task; when you fulfil your part successfully, I shall take you back to Laṅkā and even grant half my kingdom to you."

Realizing his predicament, Mārīcā resigned himself to his lot and spoke his mind finally: "When the king loses his sense of justice, his ministers advise him. Unfortunately you have neither a personal friend of responsibility nor an adequate adviser. Such an

evil ruler as you is doomed to fall and die. Along with you I too am fated to die. However, it is better I die at the hands of that divine Rāma than by your punishment. Thereby I am sure to go to Heaven. Here I go to Rāma's cottage and do as you wish."

Pleased with Mārīca's words, Rāvaṇa escorted him in his chariot to Rāma's cottage. There, assuming the shape of a golden deer, Mārīca was skipping about. The other beasts of the place smelt him and finding him to be a false creature avoided his company.

Going into the garden to pick flowers, Sītā saw that false deer. Bewitched by its radiantly golden hues, Sītā at once longed to possess it. She called Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa and entreated them to fetch the golden deer for her.

Then Lakṣmaṇa warned Rāma: "Brother, this golden deer must be a Rākṣasa in disguise. To be lured by it is to court disaster. It is better to kill it rightaway."

Rāma too was doubtful. But he thought that Lakṣmaṇa was being too cautious and skeptical after their former experience with so many Rākṣasas in disguise. Besides, he wondered, even if Mārīca, who was formerly punished by him, came back in this form, how could any harm come from a mere deer?

So, guided by the inexorable dictates of Destiny, Rāma followed the deer to catch it and make a present of it to Sītā who wanted to take it to Ayodhyā as a valuable treasure for her castle.

As the deer ran hither and thither, taking Rāma away from the vicinity of the cottage, Rāma was vexed by its flight and at last hit it with an arrow. Struck by the arrow, Mārīca piteously cried "Oh! Lakṣmaṇa, Oh! Sītā" before dying. Mārīca went to heaven, thanks to his being killed by the divine Rāma. Rāma wended his way back home.

IRONY OF FATE

Here Sītā, guarded by Lakṣmaṇa, heard Mārīca's cry, imitating Rāma's voice. She said: Lakṣmaṇa, didn't you hear the distressful cry of your brother? Why are you so helplessly

motionless? I am afraid some harm has befallen Rāma. Please hurry up and go to his aid."

Lakṣmaṇa still kept quiet. He knew it was the feigned cry of the wily Mārīca. He also knew ■■■ harm could come to Rāma from such ■ creature. It was his duty to protect Sītā in Rāma's absence; besides, the invincible Rāma doesn't need his protection. That was why he did not respond to Sītā's thoughtless request.

But Sītā, for her part, lost her presence of mind. Rāma was her all. In her extreme love she could not weigh the pros and cons of her move. She was very angry with Lakṣmaṇa. She chided him: "Lakṣmaṇa, is this how you show your love for your brother? You boasted that you came to the forest to help your brother. You need not bother about me. My concern is for Rāma. Now go and make good your boast."

Lakṣmaṇa was hurt by Sītā's words. He was sorry that she misunderstood his inaction and silence. So he explained: "Mother, you are the embodiment of virtue and good fortune. Your husband is unconquerable. That cry was from Mārīca. There is ■■■■ conspiracy by the Rākṣasas. I promised Rāma to watch over you; if I leave you now I will be guilty of breaking my word to my brother. Please rest assured that Rāma is unharmed and that he will come back soon, killing that wicked false deer."

Instead of pacifying Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa's words further irritated her. She could not understand why the usually obedient Lakṣmaṇa was so adamant. Needlessly worried about her husband's safety, she abused him: "Lakṣmaṇa, you are stony-hearted and unreliable. What makes you think that protecting ■■■ is more important than helping Rāma? Do you think I will live if Rāma is no more? Don't worry about ■■■ and go away."

Tearfully, Lakṣmaṇa replied: "Mother, you are a goddess. You are innately kind and charitable. Why should you speak like this? Perhaps your extreme love for Rāma made you heartless. Perhaps it is the decree of Destiny that I should now disobey my brother's command not to leave you alone. I feel bad omens. I do not know whether I shall again be able to ■■■ you and Rāma together or whether I myself shall be able to ■■■■ back safe. I am reluctantly obeying you. May God bless you."

Sītā reiterated: "Lakṣmaṇa, if my husband does not return, death alone will be my refuge. I shall drown myself in the river Godāvarī or fall from ■ mountain peak or drink poison or jump into fire." Then she began crying "O Rāma, O my Lord!"

Lakṣmaṇa was helpless. He was hurt that Sītā doubted his very integrity. Placing her safety in the hands of God and concentrating his mind ■ Rāma, he left in search of his brother.

Who was to look after Sītā now? She lost her consciousness because of her worry and fright. She dreamt that her parents-in-law and her father were before her, weeping for her. She knew not how to console them. Then she felt the presence of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa before her mind's eye. She regained her confidence. The elders seemed to tell her that Rāma was safe and that he killed Mārica. They left, wishing good luck to Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa. By the time Sītā regained her wits, all around her was quiet and blank. Her melancholy kept her sole company.

FALSE ASCETIC

Rāvaṇa arrived on the scene and stared at Sītā to his heart's content. She indeed was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen; he realized that Śūrpaṇakhā did not exaggerate in her report. He felt that life without Sītā near him would not be worth living. He was under the spell of Cupid and completely bowled over. Rāvaṇa was actually an austere devotee of Lord Śiva; but he was destined to lose his head like any other man caught in the snare of physical passion.

Putting on ochre robes like an ascetic, and chanting Vedic hymns, he approached the forlorn Sītā. The five elements and the gods in heaven were trembling at the thought of what was to follow, but they also knew that he was courting his imminent death. The river Godāvarī seemed to shed tears for Sītā.

Rāvaṇa addressed Sītā: "Who are you, dear lady? Why are you crying? My heart goes out to you. Just tell me what you want and I will fulfil your wish. I am enamoured of your good looks. Really, who wouldn't love such a lovely woman as you? This jungle is no place for you. Here among the demons you cannot be

safe. You are a youthful beauty who should be lolling in soft beds in kingly palaces. None of the heavenly damsels like Rambhā, Ūrvaśī, not even the consort of Indra, Śacī Devī herself, is your equal in beauty. How great must be the skill of Brahmā who created you!"

Sītā was bewildered. Who is this man wearing ochre robes? Could it be that Lord Viṣṇu came down in this form to protect her? If so, why would he speak in this questionable fashion?

True to her reputation of hospitality, she did Rāvaṇa the honours due to a guest. Rāvaṇa was terribly pleased that his trick was bearing fruit. He felt that Sītā would be his, and thereby Rāma would kill himself, leading to Lakṣmaṇa's suicide. While he was thus congratulating himself, Sītā said: "Learned Brāhmin, may God bless you. Please note that I am the wife of dutiful Rāma. We are here only for a certain period and as soon as Rāma's vow is fulfilled we will return to Ayodhyā. We are inseparables. However, please tell me who you are. Please take rest here. Soon my husband will return home."

Smilingly, Rāvaṇa said, "Lady, I am Rāvaṇa, on hearing whose very name the three worlds tremble. I am the lord of Laṅkā. I have in my harem a million women who obey my every wish. But after seeing you I no longer think of them with love. Such a tender beauty as you must not live in the jungle. I alone am a fit companion for you. I will take you to Laṅkā and make you my chief consort. Thousands of maids will be constantly serving you."

Sītā was rudely shocked. She realized the truth of Lakṣmaṇa's words. Oh, who is there to protect her now? She said: "O lord of Laṅkā, you are like a brother to me. Is it fair on your part to speak like this? My husband is an unconquerable hero. I do not know who my mother is, but my foster-father is the mighty King Janaka. Courting me is like playing with fire. Your wishes will never be fulfilled. You are like a man hoping for immortality by drinking poison. You are a gnat compared with my lion-like husband. Be wise and go back the way you came. Else you will meet your death at the hands of Rāma."

Rāvaṇa was still foolishly adamant. How can a Rākṣasa see reason? Laughing at her words, he replied: "I am the brother of

the heavenly Kubera. There is none in these three worlds who can conquer ~~me~~. Even Kubera could not withstand my onslaught and had to flee Laṅkā to ~~the~~ Kailāsa. I have with ~~me~~ the airplane Puṣpaka which will take us to our destination in a matter of seconds. The capital of my kingdom is far richer than Amarāvati of Indra. You have ~~to~~ see Laṅkā for yourself to believe in its countless riches and treasures. Lush green parks, diamond-studded golden vessels and marble palaces are only a few of its possessions I can describe in words. We ~~two~~ together would be the fittest enjoyers of its pomp and pageantry. Come, let us go. ~~If~~ you refuse me you will live to regret your folly like Ūrvaśi who shunned Purūrava of yore. Please, don't make me suffer any longer under the attack of Cupid. Your ~~Rāma~~ is ~~a~~ mortal man, whereas I am an immortal demi-god. Even the god of Death flees from me."

Losing her temper, Sītā shouted: "You wicked demon, the god of Death is actually reaching ~~out~~ ~~to~~ take you into ~~his~~ inescapable arms. Otherwise you wouldn't plan such a sinful thing."

Rāvaṇa was inwardly pleased with Sītā's chastity. He was mentally congratulating Rāma in having found such an exemplary mate. ~~He~~ realized the truth of Mārica's words, but ~~was~~ still determined to pursue his strategy of seeing the end of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa through the abduction of Sītā. As Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa might return any moment, he thought there was no point in further convincing Sītā by words, and revealed ~~his~~ real form. Sītā ~~was~~ ~~terrified~~ by his Rākṣasa shape and fell in a ~~swarm~~, crying "O Rāma, O Lakṣmaṇa." Bodily lifting her up, Rāvaṇa carried her ~~to~~ his golden chariot.

The heartrending cries of Sītā could ~~not~~ move Rāvaṇa, but as ~~she~~ regained consciousness and lamented further, the surrounding world of nature itself seemed ~~to~~ share her grief.

FORCED FLIGHT

Sītā, addressing ~~the~~ flora ~~and~~ fauna of the forest, lamented: "Owing to the decree of a cruel Fate I had to leave you ~~all~~ dear ones. Please convey ~~the~~ news of Rāvaṇa's kidnapping me to

Rāma. That great hero will surely rescue me and will make Rāvaṇa's body my prey to vultures. There is no place for any one other than Rāma in my heart. I shall continue to live only with the hope of seeing Rāma again. I am the lucky one who could be the wife of Śrī Rāma and the daughter of King Janaka: their great name and fame will not be tarnished on my account. I now sadly say goodbye and thanks to you all who have been my mute and sweet companions all these days."

The mute companions seemed to cry in reply: "Have Truth and Justice really died in this world? Is there my place on earth for virtue and righteousness?"

Addressing the river Gōdāvarī, Sītā cried: "Sacred river, please don't forget me and tell my Rāma of my sad plight." Gōdāvarī seemed to respond with inconsolable grief. Sītā said she would once again greet the river-goddess on her way back to Ayōdhyā, and finally took her leave of Pañcavaṭī.

DUTY OF A FRIEND

Sītā's cries fell upon the ears of the mighty vulture Jaṭāyu who was reposing in a nearby tree. As he formerly promised Rāma, he told himself that as long as he was alive he would not let any harm come to Sītā. So he got ready for a fight with Rāvaṇa. The dutiful, old friend of the Ikṣvāku family could not stand the sight of Sītā's abduction and despite his age challenged Rāvaṇa: "You cruel fellow, take care! Note that I am Jaṭāyu, the brother of Sampāti, the kinsman of the heavenly Garuḍa. Besides, I am the servant of Rāma and it is my duty to protect Sītā. Touching her is playing with fire. You were misinformed by your sister Śūrpaṅakhā; actually she was the guilty party because she was wildly in love with Rāma and wanted to devour Sītā. It was only then that Rāma ordered Lakṣmaṇa to cut off her nose and ears. You, as a king must not forsake the path of righteousness and let your revengeful sister guide your actions. Rāma is not at all to blame. Even now it is not too late. Leave Sītā alone. Or else lose all hope of living."

Rāvaṇa was surprised. Why did Śūrpaṅakhā stoop to such a vile strategy? He was having second thoughts on his hasty step, but, although he admitted to himself that he was no longer

justified in stealing Sītā, he still could not bring himself to change his mind. For, he foolishly reasoned, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa would only think that he was afraid of fighting with them and would in any case punish him for attempting the abduction in the first place. Thus, since he would have to fight with them anyway, he was not willing to release Sītā.

Jaṭāyu then had no option but to attack Rāvaṇa. First he partly demolished Rāvaṇa's chariot and then severely wounded the mules and the charioteer. Afterwards he began hurting Rāvaṇa with his beak. Blood was flowing out of Rāvaṇa's body. Letting go of Sītā for a while, he cut off the wings and feet of Jaṭāyu with his sword. Jaṭāyu fell down to the ground. Then Sītā lamented: "Oh Rāma, this noble Jaṭāyu gave his life fighting for me. Oh, who will save me now but you? Oh please hurry up, Rāma, come and kill this wretched Rāvaṇa!"

Rāvaṇa continued his flight in the cloudy region. Sītā was struggling in his arms and trying her best to be freed from his clutches. The flowers in her hairdo were scattered; she was trembling with shame and frustration; and she was weeping incessantly. Only God could understand her agitated mind. The ways of Providence are inscrutable: such a mighty offence against this noble lady must be paid for by the extinction of the offender's entire race.

King Janaka dreamt that some cruel person was abducting Sītā. He wondered why none in the three worlds came forward to rescue her. He saw Sītā trying to jump down from the chariot as soon as she saw him, but Rāvaṇa was not letting her go. The airborne chariot was flying at top speed. At that moment Janaka woke up. Seeing none before him, he realized it was a dream; but since there must have been some cause for the evil dream he prayed God for the welfare of his beloved daughter.

Although Rāvaṇa was a great devotee of Lord Śiva, he lost his sense of proportion because of the inherent wickedness of his Rākṣasa (demon) birth. His intense passion for the possession of the noble Sītā could only lead to disaster, but he was predestined to be unaware of his impending downfall.

As for Sītā, it was the irony of fate that such a high-born lady, used to the comforts of a royal household since birth, should suffer all these indignities.

As the plane was progressing towards Laṅkā, Sītā's glance fell on some five monkey-lords seated on a mountain peak. She thought that they could convey the news of her abduction to Rāma. So she bound her jewels in a piece of her robe and dropped the bundle near them. The monkeys looked up when they saw the jewels and were grieved to find some wicked person forcibly carrying a weeping woman. The learned *Siddhas* (seers) foretold that Rāvaṇa's end was fast approaching. Rāvaṇa arrived in Laṅkā with Sītā.

Sītā was so grief-struck that she was lost to all outside consciousness. Rāvaṇa placed her in a secluded house and called some Rākṣasa maids and commissioned them to take every care of her. Then he ordered some eight doughty warriors of his to go to Janasthāna and keep him informed of every move of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, who were responsible for the killing of so many of their kin there.

After resting for a while he was again reminded of Sītā. He was completely caught in the grip of lustful desire for her. He left his mansion and went up to her. As she saw him, Sītā was frightened like a deer at the sight of the huntsman. Seeing no sign of change in Sītā's appearance or attitude, Rāvaṇa asked his servantmaids to escort her to the interior of the palace in the hope of dazzling her with his power and possessions, grandeur and generosity.

It is true that Rāvaṇa's castle has such golden doors, ivory windows, gem-studded floors, and is surrounded by lovely and fragrant flower-creepers, that could nowhere else be found on earth. But Sītā was one who left all her palatial comforts to be with her husband in the wild jungles: Rāvaṇa was presumptuous in hoping that his pomp would make him acceptable to that nobly chaste lady. She lives only for Rāma.

QUEER COUNSEL

The foolishly lovelorn Rāvaṇa begged Sītā: "Dear queen, your beauty and charm have completely subdued me. I and

everything that is mine ■■■ at your service. None can conquer me or my kingdom. Who is Rāma compared with me? Just ■■ ordinary mortal, ■■ exile, a disinherited prince, an ascetic-like jungle-dweller. What sort of life is it that you lead in his company? Surely, you know that youth is transient and you must make 'the most of it while you yet may. It is idiotic to think of right and wrong before enjoying this short-lived possession of ours. Just as you cannot catch air or touch fire nor keep mercury motionless, so also you cannot own this youth for long. So let us both enjoy ourselves in each other's arms. Here is the Puṣpaka airplane. Let ■■ go for a pleasure flight in it. If you think it is wrong to live with ■■ you are mistaken: it is certainly not unlawful for a woman to leave a husband who cannot look after her properly. Come, please take me. I can't live another minute without having you in my arms."

Fearing hasty action from the wild Rakṣasa, Sītā placed a charmed piece of grass between him and her, and said: "Brother, I once again tell you that the scions of Ikṣvāku are chaste and honest people. Besides, they have incomparable and unconquerable strength. In the presence of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa you will fly away like paper in the windstorm.

*Gatāyuh tvam, gata śriko, gata sattvo, gatendriyah,
Laṅkā vaidhavyasamyuktā tvat kṛtena bhaviṣyati.*

Because of your vile deeds, both your health and wealth ■■ deteriorating. Do you think that ■ royal swan playing with lovely lilies and lotuses in the lake would care for a crow?"

The disappointed Rāvaṇa shouted back: "It is my fault to have loved you. You have no appreciation of the beautiful. Your beauty is ■ worthless ■ a desert flower. The Creator wasted his energy in creating you. I don't like to enjoy your favours against your will, so I give you another twelve months to change your mind. If you do not become mine by then I shall cut you into pieces and eat you for my breakfast." Calling the Rākṣasa women, he ordered them: "Take this woman to the Aśoka garden. There keep her in a secret place. Try to bring her round to my wishes either by threats or by nice words." The maids accordingly took her to the Aśoka garden

There in that peaceful garden of extreme natural loveliness, Sītā was spending her time always with Rāma in her mind and ~~was~~ in her eyes...

Here Mārīca's false cry made Rāma realize that there ~~must~~ have been a plot to steal Sītā. If she heard these cries, she would send Lakṣmaṇa to his ~~rescue~~. Then there was no knowing what sort of ill might befall her. At that time an owl was hooting. Rāma was further distressed at this bad omen, and with faltering steps and a heavy heart walked back to the cottage.

As he was approaching home, he ~~saw~~ Lakṣmaṇa coming up to him with eyes full of tears. Lakṣmaṇa was suffering from great distress, as a result of his leaving Sītā alone and of his having to explain this wrong step to his brother. However, he ~~was~~ sure Rāma would understand his position, when told the truth.

As ~~soon~~ as Rāma ~~saw~~ Lakṣmaṇa, his left eye began to throb, foreboding evil. The grieving Lakṣmaṇa fell at Rāma's feet. Rāma asked him what ~~was~~ the matter, and why he was coming away leaving Sītā unprotected. Tearfully, Lakṣmaṇa told ~~him~~ that transpired between him and Sītā when Mārīca's cry was heard.

Indeed how artless was Sītā: She momentarily forgot that her husband was gifted with divine powers and feared for his safety. Added to this were the natural impatience and lack of farsightedness, so characteristic of her sex. Thus she brought on herself and her dear husband and brother-in-law needless troubles.

Rāma said, "Lakṣmaṇa, you are my alter ego and Sītā is my very soul. She is tender and unused to toil and trouble. It is only out of great love for me she has braved the discomforts of jungle life. Now the Rākṣasa race is bent on taking revenge ~~on~~ for our killing of Khara, Dūṣaṇa and others. In our absence they might have done her ~~great~~ harm. Let ~~me~~ hurry back and see what has happened to her."

Presently they reached their cottage. The usually welcoming Sītā was not to be ~~seen~~ at the threshold. The whole surroundings looked barren. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa entered the interior of the cottage; ~~nowhere~~ there they found ~~any~~ trace of Sītā. Their hearts ~~were~~ broken.

CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

Rāma uttered an anguished cry: "Sītā, Sītā!" His lament seemed to echo from earth to heaven. There was no response from Sītā. Rāma now came to the conclusion that she was in some danger.

Lakṣmaṇa knew not how to console Rāma. He was wondering at the ways of inscrutable Providence which could cause such agony to even a learned, self-disciplined and self-realized person like Rāma. For Rāma could not be unaware of the fact of the mortality of the body and of the immortality of the soul. If it were not all the powerful play of Māyā, Rāma would not have grieved over such bodily separation. But perhaps all this was meant for a higher purpose.

Still hoping against hope that she might have gone to fetch water from Godāvarī or to gather fruits from the forest, they searched the vicinity thoroughly. But still no trace of her. The dumb creatures of the Pāñcavaṭī region sympathised with Rāma, but since they cannot articulate their thoughts they could not convey to him the news of Rāvaṇa's treachery.

Then Rāma began to lament thus: "O gods and goddesses of the forest, tell me, where is my Sītā? What has happened to her? Have you sent her on any mission? All these days you were kindly protecting us. Why do you keep silent now? What harm have I done you? Don't you know that my life is empty without Sītā? What could I say in reply to her father's query about her whereabouts? What could I say to explain the absence of Sītā to the citizens of Mithilā and Ayodhyā? Is it fair on your part to separate a loving couple? Or do you indulge in it as a sport? I have sought your company forsaking the kingdom of Kosala. Is this your way of showing your appreciation of my selfless act? How can I go back to Ayodhyā without Sītā?

"O Sītā, Sītā, where are you? I can't live without seeing you. If you do not appear to me now, our meeting will again be only in the next world. How unlucky I am to let you go!"

Similarly, in his forlorn state, Rāma went up to all the flora and fauna, all the hills and dales, all the lakes and ponds, asking them for news of Sītā.

Seeing Rāma weeping and raving like this, even the gods in heaven shed tears. Of course, they knew that the abduction of Sītā was foreordained, for it was by committing this sin that Rāvaṇa had to pay with his life. Rāma had to prove for all time the supreme fact that great men would not flinch from any kind of sacrifice, even of being separated from their nearest and dearest, to protect the righteous and punish the wicked.

Then Rāma went on to query river Godāvarī: "O sacred stream, you are like a mother to us, you are the source of our living. Please tell me where Sītā is. Have you hidden her in your fond bosom? You know we two are inseparable spirits and cannot live without always enjoying each other's company. So I shall be eternally obliged to you if you can inform me about where she is. If I die now, in my desperation at the loss of Sītā, I would be bringing shame and sorrow to the Ikṣvāku clan. I promised my father to go back to Ayodhyā with Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa after the period of exile. How can I break that promise? But still, how can I lead this life, bereft of Sītā? Let me ensconce myself in your holy waters."

So declaring, Rāma jumped into the river Godāvarī. Immediately Lakṣmaṇa went to his rescue and fetched him back to the bank. Rāma was unconscious for a time. Lakṣmaṇa was grieving that such a lot befell the noble couple who were so selflessly trying to stand by truth and justice.

At the same hour Kausalyā had a bad dream. She saw only Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa on the banks of Godāvarī, but couldn't find Sītā nearby. She also saw Rāma crying "Sītā, Sītā!" His body was emaciated. His naturally bright figure looked care-worn, and he had a crazed look in his eye. Then she saw him jumping into the river; Lakṣmaṇa followed suit; both were being tossed by the waves. She woke up crying "Rāma, Oh Rāma!", and as she opened her eyes she saw none before her. She was afraid some misfortune had befallen Rāma.

Bharata also had a similar dream and was equally suffering.

Here Rāma's consciousness was slowly revived by the efforts of Lakṣmaṇa. As he came to, Rāma found Lakṣmaṇa crying. He said: "Lakṣmaṇa, where is my darling Sītā? Won't you bring her back to me? Oh, Why did mother Godāvarī refuse to conceal me

in her bosom? Brother, I shall always be grateful for your faithfulness, though I can never repay my debt to your service. Please forget all about me and Sītā, go back to Ayodhyā, and take care of my mother Kausalyā. Be friendly to Bharata and convey my best wishes to him. Also thank the citizens of Ayodhyā on behalf of me and give them my best regards. May the kingdom of Kosala prosper for ever! May the ~~name~~ and fame of the Ikṣvāku dynasty shine eternally! Oh, oh! There! The sun-god is shining brightly. O Lord, you bring light to the whole world; there is not a nook or corner you do not enter. Can't you tell me where my Sītā is?"

Lakṣmaṇa said: "Rāma, you are a wise man and a scholar. You must not grieve like this. My inner voice assures me Sītā is safe. The wily Rākṣasas must have kidnapped her to threaten us. I do not have to tell you that we must bear with fortitude all such upsets and face up to life's challenges with courage and confidence. Then we are sure to achieve success in all our efforts."

Rāma found solace in these wise words. He congratulated Lakṣmaṇa on his sagacity and told him that they should rightaway go in search of Sītā and must not rest till they found her. Rāma also knew that the Rākṣasas were only trying to embarrass him and would not venture to kill Sītā.

SEARCH

And so Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa set upon their quest in earnest. They tearfully took their leave of the birds and beasts. The dumb creatures signalled their solicitous information by flying southwards so as to let Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa understand that Sītā was taken away in that direction.

As the brothers proceeded down south, they saw scattered flowers on the ground. Rāma joyously realized that they were the very ones that he plucked for Sītā. They were still fresh and seemed to give a new loveliness to Mother Earth. This happy omen gave Rāma good hope. His right shoulder throbbed as further confirmation of his coming success. He lovingly gathered the petals and fondly caressed them. He begged of them to give

him news of Sītā; they appeared to be saturated with the grief they shared with Rāma. These flowers dropped down from Sītā's hairdo when Rāvaṇa forcibly took her away from the cottage. They seemed to regain their life when Rāma touched them and felt that their hope of informing him about the direction in which Sītā went was fulfilled. Rāma gathered all the flowers and kept them as mementos.

Further down Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa found traces of footsteps, some large and some small. Realizing that they were respectively those of the Rākṣasa and of Sītā, they glanced about the place and saw the remnants of a broken bow and a chariot and the remains of a dead charioteer and mules. They concluded from these that somebody must have fought with the Rākṣasa. Along with sympathy for the devotee who defended his cause, Rāma's heart hardened against the criminal who caused him distress. If, as they say, *Dharma* protects those that protect it, why was it that Sītā was not rescued (of course Rāma, in the form of a human being, could not realize the ultimate purpose of this divinely predestined act)? So, he thought his goodness brought him no reward and he should not hesitate to punish the Rākṣasas without showing them the least mercy. That was the only way to teach the criminals a lesson, for they can never understand the might of great men unless it is displayed against them.

*Kartāramapi lokānām sūram Karuṇavedinam,
Ajñānādavamanyeran sarvabhūtāni lakṣmaṇa.*

Old age and death are inescapable, but while we live we must make the most of our lives. If the gods do not help me in my quest, they too will be punished by me.

SAGE COUNSEL

Never before did Lakṣmaṇa see Rāma getting so angry with the world as now. Fearing awful consequences, he advised Rāma: "Brother, you know how anger makes a man lose his sense of proportion. Of course I know that it is impossible to separate your innate goodness from you, just as it is impossible to exterminate the sun's light, the moon's coolness and the air's movement. I only want you to realize that the gods would never hide Sītā and so you

must not swear at them. It is the Rākṣasas that abducted her, and we will not rest till we find her."

Lakṣmaṇa saw Rāma's visage slowly assuming its normal gentle look. Seeing that he was able to drive home the point, he pursued: "If you yourself lose your temper in such a way, what about the ordinary mortals? What joy will you derive from punishing the whole world? Not only you, but every one who takes birth on earth has to go through life's ups and downs. Because of Viśvāmitra's curse Vasiṣṭha lost his hundred sons; on account of Agastya's imprecation, Nahuṣa lost his kingdom. Even the sun and the moon lose light during eclipse. Then, is it strange that the ordinary mortals should suffer from occasional upsets and defeats? Surely, one's enemies must be destroyed, but first find out who your real enemies are before trying to take vengeance upon the whole creation. Forgive me for giving this advice: it is not as if you need being told by me, for I am repeating the wise words you yourself taught me. I am merely trying to drive away the momentary veil that is covering your true knowledge."

Rāma accepted Lakṣmaṇa's advice, for he knew it is right to listen even to the young when they talk sense. He asked Lakṣmaṇa to set about the task of searching for Sītā in earnest. Since Janasthāna has again become the abode of Rākṣasas, they first proceeded thither to look for her.

As they went farther, they saw the wounded Jaṭāyu. Seeing Rāma, the blessed bird said: "Noble prince, I am just waiting with my last breath to talk to you. Rāvaṇa stole Sītā at the moment known as Vinda. Whatsoever one loses during that period, is sure to recover it in good time. I attacked Rāvaṇa with all my might. Now I am about to die. My sole last wish is to die in your arms. So kindly embrace me." Rāma did accordingly, and Jaṭāyu discarded his mortal coil uttering the divine words: "Rāma, Rāma."

Rāma was immensely moved. That such self-sacrifice flourishes even among birds and beasts was a great revelation to him. Although they could not personally attend to the cremation of their father, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa thought it was quite a compensation to perform the last rites of this great friend of their clan. Asking Lakṣmaṇa to make the needed arrangements, Rāma

lamented: "Great Jaṭāyu, you gave your life in the defence of my beloved Sītā. How can we ever repay your debt? The least we can do for you is to honour you with these last rites. Please go to those higher worlds where great souls like you dwell. But please don't wound my father's heart by telling him about Sītā's abduction. Here we offer you and our father our final salutations."

The soul of Jaṭāyu was highly gratified by this noble act of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa

AYOMUKHI

Then, taking up their arms, the brothers carefully proceeded on their journey. On the way they found a huge cave. They entered it warily. There they ran into a ferocious witch. Her name is Ayomukhi. She caught hold of Lakṣmaṇa and said: "My hero, you have stolen my heart. Let us go out to the river bank and enjoy ourselves. Oh, why are you hesitating to take me in your arms? Don't you try to escape from me! I will now embrace you tightly and none can then separate us."

Even human beings lose their common sense when overwhelmed by physical passion. It wasn't strange that this witch had no consideration for the difference between this handsome prince and her wretched self. Lakṣmaṇa was naturally infuriated, and released himself from her clutches by cutting off her arms, nose and ears. The well-punished witch took her departure dejectedly.

KABANDHA

As they went out of the cave, they felt certain bad omens. They were uneasy about what would befall them. But suddenly a Vāñjula bird uttered her sweet cry, thereby assuring them that good alone will ultimately result.

At this point there were to be heard ferocious sounds. Gazing in that direction Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa saw a gigantic trunk without head or thighs. All that the wild creature has are two long arms, a protruding tongue and a single discoloured eye. He catches hold of

■ passers-by and eats them. Similarly he caught Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa and threw them down to the ground and pressed them mercilessly. That trunk was that of Kabandha.

Rāma was not frightened but Lakṣmaṇa was. The latter said: "Brother, I am ■■■ to die ■ the hands of this Kabandha. Please release yourself and go back to Ayodhyā along with Sītā and rule the people with justice for ■ long time. Please console my mother Sumitrā and my wife Ūrmilā. Kindly remember me in your prayers. That is all I seek from you."

Rāma replied: "Lakṣmaṇa, don't be discouraged. Life and death are matters of course, and we must not be adversely affected by them in any circumstances. Time alone will decide whether this Kabandha can take our lives or not."

Hearing these words, Lakṣmaṇa regained his normal sagacity and said: "Rāma, this fellow's strength lies in his arms. Let us therefore cut them off."

The angered Kabandha tried to swallow both the brothers. But even before he made his attempt, Rāma cut his right shoulder and Lakṣmaṇa his left. The mortally wounded Kabandha then realized that these were the divine brothers who were to release him from the ■■■ of Indra.

The newly saved soul of Kabandha confessed: "Rāma, I was ■■■ a brave and fine man like you. But because of Brahmā's boon I was proud. I offended Indra who cut my head and hit my thighs so ■ to make them part of my trunk. When I sought his forgiveness he granted that I have long ■■■ and that my mouth and eye remain in my trunk. I once again attacked ■ sage in this forest. He cursed that I always remain in this shape. When I begged his pardon he granted that I would find release at your hands. Now please cremate me, for I am unable to bear this agony. After my cremation I shall get divine knowledge and tell you how you will succeed in your quest."

STRATEGY

After the cremation, Kabandha was released from his demoniac form and regained his original one. Shining in all the

brightness of his fire-purified glory, he said: "Rāma, thank you for freeing me from my curse. You know how kings succeed in this world through the six-fold state-craft of Truce, Attack, Crusade, Occupation, Diplomacy, Armistice. Now, the best way of obtaining help from people is to assist those who are in trouble.

"There are two monkey-kings, Vāli and Sugrīva. Because of his cupidity, the former drove away the latter and usurped his throne, though they are brothers. Sugrīva is now dwelling with his faithful companions in the R̥ṣyamūka valley on the banks of Pampā. He is a brave and honest man. Befriend him. He and his people will surely aid you in the search for Sītā. But before you promise each other mutual help, don't forget to vow in the presence of Lord Agni that you wouldn't let down each other.

"This is the way to Pampā lake. Its waters are ambrosial and filled with lovely lilies and lotuses. In its flowery and fruitful surroundings the great sage Matanga lived once upon a time. Now on its western bank lives a pious lady named Śabari. She has been waiting long for the good fortune of seeing you before leaving this planet for ever.

"Opposite the lake is R̥ṣyamūka mountain, a holy place. The good people who sleep there are sure to realize in real life whatever dreams they dream. Evil people dare not set foot on its rocks; even if they do they will be pestered in sleep by demons. Inside its valley is Sugrīva who will receive and give help."

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were pleased with Kabandha's words and thanked him. He went up to his heavenly abode in his shining form.

ŚABARI

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa arrived at the hermitage of Śabari. She was a picture of piety. In her emaciated form, with her hair dishevelled and wizened, she shone brightly on account of her penance's power.

Rāma was delighted to see this noble maidservant of Lord Matanga. For her part she was enraptured at his sight and tears of joy rolled down her cheeks. She rushed forward eagerly to greet

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa and touched the dust of their feet. After doing them all the honours, she stood with folded hands, thinking: "How divinely attractive is Rāma! That is why he is popularly known ■ 'Sundara Rāma' (handsome Rāma). Oh how fortunate I am to be able to see this great personage, of whom sage Mataṅga spoke so highly!" In concentrating her sight on Rāma she could again see the form of her departed Master, Mataṅga.

Rāma, too, could not take his eyes off Śabari. He thought: "I ■■ reminded of my mother Kausalyā looking at this pious lady. I wonder why she is so devoted to me. After all, am I not an ordinary mortal? How can I repay the devotion and affection of all such good people?"

Rāma fondly embraced Śabari. She felt supreme bliss and her eyes were again filled with ecstatic tears.

Rāma said: "Mother, your penance has been your fortune. I am sure you have all along been able to discipline yourself and resist the temptations and obstacles that bother the ascetics. Your service to your *Guru* has borne fruit. We are lucky in seeing such a realized soul ■ you."

Śabari replied: "Rāma, seeing you has been the greatest fruit of my penance. While you were at Citrakūṭa my master Mataṅga happened to see you on his way to paradise. He later informed me that it would be a great blessing to ■■ to be able to see you. Since then I have been longing for your visit. I ■■■ only offer you a little fruit, but I ■■■ not ashamed of it, because great ■■■ like you accept with delight even the smallest gift their devotees offer. Kindly eat this and please me."

Accepting the fruit and eating it, Rāma said: "Holy lady, your heart is as sweet as nectar; that is why your hearty gift tastes like ambrosia. You could not have made a greater gift to me. I ■■■ immensely grateful to you." She gave similar fruits to Lakṣmaṇa, who ate them with much satisfaction.

Śabari thanked Rāma for his kind words, and escorted them to the Mataṅga hermitage.

Mataṅga in his old age could even manage to bring the water of the seven seas for his ablution. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa could still

the glory of that great sage pervading the whole atmosphere. They saw it was no wonder that those who performed penance there attained salvation without fail.

Rāma told Śabari: "Noble lady, now it is the right time for you to join your master in heaven. Yours has been an exemplary life on earth and your story will ever remain illustrious and inspiring to the women of all ages."

She then entered the holy fire and shining in heavenly brightness ascended to paradise—as her master formerly did.

After taking a good look at that illumining form, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa offered last rites to her earthly remains.

On seeing lake Pampā, Rāma was again reminded of Sītā. Lakṣmaṇa saw that he was again filled with longing and grief on account of his separation from his noble beloved. He therefore guided his brother's steps towards Ṛṣyamūka mountain.

As they approached that beautiful mountain area, Rāma asked Lakṣmaṇa to go forward and have a talk with Sugrīva.

Rāma is now an exile from his kingdom; he is separated from his wife. In such a state he could not himself rush forward to meet a stranger to seek his help. However, as Kabandha advised, he knew that Sugrīva and his army would be of great help to him. So he sent his younger brother in advance, for the sake of form.

KISKINDHĀ KĀNDA

PAMPĀ

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa reached the Pampā lake. They were exhilarated by the sight of the lovely lilies and lotuses in the waters, and the lush greenery all around.

Rāma suddenly had a mysterious feeling that he was wandering in this charming region in the company of his beloved Śītā. The gods in heaven surmised this feeling of Rāma and blessed him that his wishes would be fulfilled.

But the next moment Rāma's visage revealed signs of distress. Seeing him thus, Lakṣmaṇa said: "Brother, you are the greatest of men. I know how you and Śītā love each other. But there is no reason why you should lose heart and grieve like this. Rāvaṇa's end is in sight. If he really wants to live on, he will return Śītā to you. Or else I will kill him wherever he hides himself, and restore Śītā to you."

Rāma was somewhat consoled. Accompanied by Lakṣmaṇa, he proceeded towards mount Ṛṣyamūka. Sugrīva, who was pacing up and down on its peak, happened to see the brothers. Although they looked like hermits in their sackcloth and with their matted hair, the fact that they were well armed with sword, bow and arrow, frightened the monkey king. Calling upon his four trusted ministers, he pointed Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to them and said: "Look, these men might be Vāli's spies who are capable of assuming any shape they like. Is not my wicked brother prepared to let me hide in this secluded spot from which I can do him no harm? Please go out and find out who these strangers are, for you alone are capable of protecting me."

HANUMĀN

Among the four Hanumān is the most far-sighted and gifted adviser. He saw no reason for Sugrīva's fears. Mount Ṛṣyamūka

blessed with sacred invincibility, ■ a result of which the wicked people who ■■■ into contact with it would perish. Vāli knows the fact. Looking at Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, Hanumān felt that they were harmless people who ■■ distressed by some unfortunate event and who are going about an important search. As the brothers came nearer, Hanumān's confidence in them grew further, and he even thought that some good would result from their visit. So he said to Sugrīva: "Lord, rest assured that this mountain cannot be approached by Vāli or his army. We, of the monkey race, are by birth fickle-minded; our causeless fear is tantamount to suicide. A king like you must not give way to such ■ habit. You must lead us courageously. I personally believe these visitors ■■ holy men coming to do us good."

EMBASSY

Sugrīva replied: "Dear friend, I agree with you but ■■■ must be trusted unless fully tested. Vāli is a wily man who will stoop to every misdemeanour to harm ■■■. So please meet them warily, in disguise, and find out whether they ■■■ as friends or foes."

Hanumān ■■■ highly delighted that he was given the chance of greeting the visitors who inspired in him great love and respect ■■■ from a distance. As he approached them, he felt good omens and ■■■ reassured that they ■■■ good ■■■. So he revealed himself before them in the guise of ■ mendicant and offered them water and fruits, as befitting a friendly welcome.

Rāma has the inherent power of attracting, by his very presence, all those who come into contact with him; the attitudes of the others are naturally dependent on their ■■■ respective temperaments, and in ■ pious man like Hanumān, Rāma's inborn divinity found ■ ready devotee. Hanumān felt like worshipping him there and then.

Addressing the taller and the more attractive of the two, he said: "Revered sir, I bow to thee and to this younger gentleman whom I take to be your brother. You both ■■ dressed like hermits, but armed like soldiers. Besides, in you is apparent ■ grace which comes only of royal birth. May I know whether you

“The gods or ordinary men? I would also like to be enlightened on what brought you to these parts.”

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa did not reply him immediately. Rāma was staring at Hanumān and felt that the stranger was a good soul. Lakṣmaṇa, however, characteristically suspected Hanumān and was watching him carefully, to ward off any danger to Rāma.

Hanumān again spoke: “Gentlemen, why are you quiet? You are, by the might of your figures, frightening the creatures of this region. But I came from your gracious looks that you have not come here to hurt any of us. You also seem, the way you sigh in distress, to be on the lookout for something you miss. Kindly tell me the truth about yourselves.”

Having said that, Hanumān again observed their magnetic personalities. Convinced of their greatness and holiness, he thought it was no use vexing them with his questions. So he felt it was right to tell them about himself: “Revered sirs, please don’t suspect me. Permit me to introduce myself to you. I am the son of the Aerial Spirit. I am an adviser to the monkey-king Sugrīva. He lost both his kingdom and his wife to his greedy elder brother Vālī. I have come here at my lord’s behest. He is prepared to be your friend if you have no objection. I for my part am very anxious to bring you and him together.

Then Hanumān remained quiet with bowed head.

Rāma was very much impressed by Hanumān’s words and spoke to Lakṣmaṇa thus: “Brother, I am quite pleased with this worthy messenger of Sugrīva. From his very speech you can judge that he is a great scholar and that he is a trustworthy minister:

*Nānrgvedavinītasya nāyajurvedadhārīṇah,
Na sāmavedaviduṣaḥ śakyamevaṁ prabhāṣitum.*

I also feel that he will be useful to us in our search for Sītā. So let us cultivate his and his king’s friendship.”

Hanumān found a special place in Rāma’s heart. As for himself, he was more and more drawn to Rāma, the more he knew of him. He wished that his soul would be united with Rāma’s.

Indeed there was something predestined in the mutual attraction of these two respective embodiments of divinity and devotion.

Lakṣmaṇa, encouraged by Rāma's assurance, spoke to Hanumān: "Dear friend, we can see that you are the personification of duty and wisdom. We are willing to befriend you and your master. Thus we are we can be mutually helpful."

Hanumān was delighted at this instant success of his mission. He was convinced that the brothers had some problem of their own, and that the friendship between Rāma and Sugrīva would be beneficial to both. He was extremely happy that he was going to be instrumental in bringing them together.

Then Hanumān requested the brothers to let him know the reason for their visit. Obtaining Rāma's permission, Lakṣmaṇa told him all that transpired and assured Hanumān that Rāma would not be ungrateful to those that help him.

Hanumān was deeply moved by the sad story of Rāma and Sītā. For while he wondered why such good people have to suffer such indignities. Perhaps it is God's will that the hero's valour and the noble lady's chastity should be put to the severest test in order that they might be for ever exemplary and illustrious.

Hanumān said to Lakṣmaṇa: "I am determined to shed the last drop of my blood to help you in rescuing Sītā Devī. Your visit here is indeed pre-ordained. For, Sugrīva and Rāma have a somewhat similar cause for distress. By helping each other they can regain their abducted spouses. Besides, you both are such magnanimous and mighty heroes that it is a great blessing for us of the monkey race to be in your service."

Rāma was much pleased with his words and embraced him fondly. In that sacred moment Hanumān felt that his salvation was obtained. Rāma could notice the mystic reaction of his devotee. He at once set his mind at rest and was happy to entrust Hanumān with the job of rescuing Sītā.

Then Hanumān relinquished his disguise and, assuming his original mighty form, thrilled the visitors by his gigantic strength. He easily carried them on each shoulder and seated them on the

peak of R̥ṣyamūka. Then he went up to Sugrīva to convey the good news. Seeing Hanumān's delighted visage, Sugrīva realized that it was a good omen for him.

FRIENDSHIP

Hanumān told Sugrīva: "Lord, the visitors are our best friends. They are the children of King Daśaratha. Hanumān is a divine personage whose noble lifemate Sītā was abducted by Rāvaṇa. Lakṣmaṇa is an ideal brother who has dedicated his life to the service of Rāma and Sītā. By helping them we shall at the same time be able to be free from our own worries. Come and greet them duly."

Hanumān's words reminded Sugrīva of his own plight. Just as he was sorry for his wife Rumā in the clutches of Vāli, so too did he fear for the safety of Sītā on Rāvaṇa's island. He grieved for the troubles the innocent of the world have to put up with. At the same time, he told himself that all this was the will of God, and accepted Hanumān's advice. So he accompanied his adviser to greet Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa.

After mutual salutations, Sugrīva told the brothers: "Noble princes, welcome to you. Hanumān told me all about you. Rāma, I quite appreciate your position, for I too am like you. I look upon this encounter of ours as predestined. Let us shake hands and promise each other eternal friendship."

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were pleased with Hanumān's intercession. Rāma accepted Sugrīva's offer of friendship and shook him by the hand. Sugrīva felt something divine being transmitted to him in Rāma's touch.

Hanumān brought a couple of *Śamī* twigs and ignited them by rubbing one against another. He first prayed to that fire with flowers, and placed it between Rāma and Sugrīva. The two went round it, thereby sealing their mutual and constant friendship.

Then Sugrīva took the visitors to his dwelling place and did them all due honours. Sugrīva then told Rāma: "Really your visit here is a godsend. Kindly promise me again that you will rescue my wife and that my kingdom is restored to me."

Rāma reassured him: "Dear friend, I give you my solemn word. I ~~am~~ from a race which prides itself ~~on~~ forgiving even its foes who seek pardon. Please rest assured that I will crush Vāli."

At about the time this friendship ~~was~~ being forged, Sītā's left eye ~~was~~ throbbing ~~as~~ a sign of good tidings. She felt that before long her husband would come to free her and punish Rāvaṇa.

Similarly, but with ~~a~~ different connotation, Rāvaṇa's left eye (in men, this forebodes evil) throbbed and felt a bit uneasy about it. He knew that Rāma was ~~a~~ mighty hero, but he was always sure of the boon that prevents his death from gods, and thought mere ~~men~~ could do him ~~no~~ harm. However, he decided upon making all the necessary arrangements for the defence of himself and his kingdom.

Here Sugrīva again turned to Rāma reassuringly and said: "Lord, among my advisers Hanumān is the most gifted and trusted. With his help we are certain to rescue Sītā, ~~no~~ matter wherever in the three worlds does Rāvaṇa hide her. You need not be worried about the personal safety of hers, because she is pure and chaste by birth and no power on earth ~~can~~ molest her. Really, the end of the Rākṣasa race is at hand; else why should have Rāvaṇa stooped to such folly? Now I ~~can~~ tell you what transpired above this region recently. One day we heard the cries of a helpless lady from up in the sky. She was wailing: "O Rāma, O Lakṣmaṇa!" As we looked up we saw her being taken away against her will by a wicked person. Perhaps because she found it hard to be freed from his hold, she took the next best step and dropped her jewels ~~on~~ to the ground in order that they might be picked up by her husband's well-wishers and serve as a guide to her whereabouts. Luckily, the cloth bundle containing the valuable ornaments fell ~~on~~ this spot. We were unable to ~~remove~~ her because she was being carried away in an airship ~~at~~ a great speed.

"Here I shall bring the jewels. Please ~~see~~ if they ~~are~~ Sītā's."

When Sugrīva brought them, Rāma readily recognised them to be those of Sītā, the gift of her father, King Janaka. He was moved to tears, and cried aloud "Sītā, Sītā" Pressing the dear ~~ornaments~~ to his lips and against his heart, he ~~was~~ touchingly

reminded of the happy moments he passed in her beloved company. At that point, he felt the presence of Sītā before him; he broke down disconsolately; he saw her prostrate at his feet; he lifted her up and heartily took her into his arms; Sītā wiped out his hot tears; then she suddenly disappeared. Rāma cried again: "Sītā, Sītā" But he could only see around him Sugrīva, Hanumān and Lakṣmaṇa when he opened his eyes. They sympathetically remained silent.

Rāma addressed himself to Lakṣmaṇa: "Please look at these ornaments; I am sure you too can recognise them."

Then Lakṣmaṇa replied:

*Nā'ham jānāmi keyūre, nā'ham jānāmi kuṇḍale,
Nūpure tu abhijānāmi nityam pādābhivandanāt.*

"I do not know about Sītā's ornaments of the hair and the neck. I only know about those that adorn her sacred feet, for I bow to them every day."

Sugrīva and Hanumān were pleased to note Lakṣmaṇa's worthy habit of looking upon women other than his wife as his mother and sisters and of not gazing at their upper physical features. How lucky is this good man who dedicated his whole life to the service of his divine brother and his divine consort!

Once again Rāma caressed Sītā's jewels. His pangs of separation renewed, he cried aloud his determination to take revenge: "Sugrīva, that rascal who abducted that noble lady is Rāvaṇa. He is the lord of Rākṣasas and the king of Laṅkā. I have made up my mind to destroy him and his entire race."

Sugrīva and Hanumān were impressed by Rāma's will-power and were convinced that there was none in the three worlds who could challenge him in fight.

However, Sugrīva felt that emotional outbursts were not becoming a great hero like Rāma. So he said:

*Vyasane vā arthakṛchre vā bhaye vā jīvītāntake,
Vimṛśan vai svayā buddhyā dhṛtimān na avasīdati-*

“Even when he loses his fortune, or facing death, the wise man does not lose his sense of proportion. Of course you will punish Rāvaṇa. But let us calmly discuss ways and means of doing so.”

Rāma agreed with Sugrīva’s gentle admonition: “Yes, friend, your words are well-conceived. I am glad to have found a friend like you. I will certainly keep my promise to you and help you take revenge on Vāli.”

Sugrīva replied: “Lord, I know you come of the Ikṣvāku race and you never go back on your word. I also promise that I will do everything in my power to assist you in your search for Sīta Devī.”

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa partook of the fruits and other victuals Sugrīva offered and rested on mount R̥ṣyamūka for the night.

Next morning the brothers, Sugrīva and Hanumān finished their ablutions, prayers and repast, and got together for a leisurely confabulation.

SAD STORY

A tearful Sugrīva began to narrate his story: “Lord Rāma, you have already been told about my plight. Now I shall tell you in detail how Vāli and I fell out.

“Since early in his life, my elder brother has been displaying great courage and valour. Our father was therefore very fond of him. Besides, being the elder brother, he became King of Kiṣkindhā when our father passed away. I had been serving him faithfully, as befits a younger brother.

“After a while this event happened:

“There was a Rākṣasa named Māyāvī, the son of Dundubhi. He was a fierce and mighty demon. He and Vāli were rivals for the favours of a woman. On one night, Māyāvī entered our home and challenged Vāli. Although his well-wishers tried to stop him, Vāli accepted the challenge and got ready for the fight. I too assisted my brother. Unable to withstand our onslaught, Māyāvī took to his heels. We went in pursuit.

“Māyāvī entered a dark cave. Vāli ordered me to wait ■ the entrance and followed Māyāvī into the cave. I promised to do so and waited ■ very long time there, but there was no sign of Vāli’s return. I could only hear the shouts of Rākṣhasas from inside the cave. I began to fear for the safety of Vāli. One day from out of the cave blood and pieces of flesh began to flow like a stream. I thought that Māyāvī killed Vāli. To protect myself from the demon, I closed the entrance of the cave with ■ big boulder, ■ that none could ■ out of it.

“I grieved for Vāli and performed his last rites. On my return to Kiṣkindhā, the ministers and the people pressed ■ for information about Vāli. I told them the facts, and ■ all waited for his possible return for several years. As there was still no trace of Vāli, I ■ asked by ■ people to shoulder the burden of kingship. I accepted the offer, with the condition that I would relinquish the crown to Vāli if he would ever return home. I ruled the people to the best of my ability.

“After some time, Vāli returned home unexpectedly, after killing Māyāvī. I congratulated him ■ his success and bowing to his feet, apologised ■ him for the unintentional folly of mine. However, he would not accept my explanation or apology; he abused me and imprisoned me. He did not believe me when I said that I never intended to usurp him and that I ruled over the people in his absence merely to protect law and order; he said that I wilfully blocked the cave-entrance and cursed me for breaking my promise.

“He was not satisfied with imprisoning ■. He stole my wife and ■ last banished me from Kiṣkindhā.

“I do not have to tell you, Lord Rāma, that I was not at all to blame and that it ■ my sincere love and respect for my brother that made me an easy prey to his greed. I have ■ found my refuge in you. You must ■ me and my wife.”

Rāma heard Sugrīva’s story with sympathy and understanding. He again promised him his unqualified help.

Sugrīva thanked him and said: “I know you can kill any one in the universe. But it is our responsibility to gauge the strength of

the enemy before attacking him. So let me inform you of Vāli's special gifts. He offers every morning an ablution to the Sun-God with the waters of **all** the seas around this land; he can break even the mightiest mountain and fling it **like** a bouquet; he can uproot the biggest tree and throw it up like a ball."

DUNDUBHI

There is another story I have to **tell** you in this connection. "Once upon a time there was a demon named Dundubhi. He was as strong as a thousand elephants. Proud of **his** might, he challenged the sea-god for a fight. The latter humbly suggested that only the mountain-king, Himavān (the personification of Himālaya), is Dundubhi's worthy foe. So Dundubhi went and challenged Himavān. **But** Himavān also accepted his unworthiness and advised Dundubhi **to** take on Vāli. Then Dundubhi came to Kiṣkindhā and began piercing **the** city gate. **A** fierce shout accompanying his action. The whole kingdom **was** terrified. Learning what the matter was, Vāli approached Dundubhi and counselled him to give up **his** foolish errand.

"Dundubhi paid **no** heed to his counsel and said: 'Both the sea and the mountain gods told me you alone were worthy of a fight. So I have come here. However, since this is night time I **shall** wait till tomorrow morning. I know you must be enjoying yourself in your harem, and since it is proscribed **to** fight with those who are drunk or unwary or engaged in sex, I am letting you go now. But be prepared to die tomorrow.'

"Vāli was terribly **offended** by these words, and there **and** then jumped upon the demon. Vāli was wearing the golden garland offered him by Indra and was **in** invincible form. He got **hold** of the Rākṣhasa's two horns and lifting him up, swung him around and threw him to the ground. After some resistance from Dundubhi, Vāli succeeded in killing him **and** kicked up his corpse. The dead body flew up and fell **in** the hermitage of sage Maṭaṅga. Some drops of blood from **the** corpse fell on the sage who **was** in meditation. Learning **the** cause by virtue of **his** clairvoyance, Maṭaṅga drove away **the** followers of Vāli who were living in his hermitage. He also threatened them that, if either Vāli or his people would disturb him again, they would die by his curse.

“Vāli was informed of Mataṅga’s fury, and went up to him to seek his pardon. Mataṅga did not even condescend to look at him and without speaking a word, went into his hermitage. Accepting the failure of his mission, and fearing death due to curse if he lingered there, Vāli returned to Kiṣkindhā. This R̥ṣyamūka is also in the region of Mataṅga’s hermitage and Vāli dare not come near here. However, I have to tell you all this about Vāli’s valour to impress ■■■ you his powers, because we have to fight him on his ■■■■ ground.

“Here is Dundubhi’s skeleton. And there are the ■■■■ mango trees which Vāli uprooted. I shall be pleased if you tell me how you intend to quell such a mighty foe—not that I doubt your ability but that I should like to be morally uplifted by such an assurance before actually getting into the fray.”

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa laughed at Sugrīva’s needless anxiety. Rāma lightly struck Dundubhi’s skeleton with his big toe, and by that mere touch it flew up and fell many miles away. Then he aimed his arrow; it pierced the seven mango trees, entered the nether world and touching the underground waters, re-entered Rāma’s quiver. Sugrīva and Hanumān were more than impressed by his feat; they were convinced that only ■ divine incarnation could be capable of such ■ heroic effort. Sugrīva was doubly reassured that Rāma could punish Vāli, and thanked him for his display of strength.

Rāma replied: “Friend, ■■■■ make all arrangements for leaving this place and go back to Kiṣkindhā with your retinue. I shall not only kill Vāli and restore your wife to you but will also crown you king of Kiṣkindhā.”

Sugrīva readily agreed with Rāma’s advice, thanking his lucky stars for this wise step of killing Vāli before searching for Sītā. for, as ■ king, he would be able to command the loyalty and services of the whole monkey race of Kiṣkindhā to help Rāma.

After reaching Kiṣkindhā, at Rāma’s behest, Sugrīva challenged Vāli for a fight. Even ■■■ the lookout for battle, the heroic Vāli immediately responded to his brother’s challenge. Then ensued a mighty duel between the brothers. From where he stood, Rāma could not distinguish between the two similar-looking

brothers and therefore did not aim his arrow, for fear of hurting the wrong person. If Vāli had put on his gold garland, Rāma would have recognised him; but Vāli entered the fray without his favourite ornament, which he earned from the lord of gods, Indra, and which makes him invincible when worn. He had no high opinion of his brother as a fighter; so he went into the fight without the garland. Sugrīva was badly beaten, and, wondering why Rāma did not come to his rescue, turned to go back to R̥ṣyamūka. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa followed him, asking him to desist from his flight.

Shedding tears of helplessness and defeat, Sugrīva replied: "Lord Rāma, why is it that you did not help me as you promised to? I challenged Vāli only at your instigation. Somehow, he took pity on me and let me go with severe wounds; otherwise I would have died at his hands already. I do not know why you neglected me. I do not want to live in this wounded state."

Then Rāma explained to him why he could not help him. In order to facilitate identification, Rāma suggested that he wear a garland of Gajapuṣpa blossoms around his neck.

Sugrīva understood and accepted Rāma's advice. Along with his advisers he returned to Kiṣkindhā. On the way they visited the hermitage of Saptajana saints, who, merely subsisting on breathing air once a week, and standing on their head, perform their penance and attain salvation in their physical form itself. It is considered auspicious to salute them and obtain their blessings before launching on any important endeavour. Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Sugrīva and Haṇumān bowed to the sages and felt reassured of success for having visited their hermitage. At the same time the left eye of Sītā, Rāvaṇa and Vāli throbbed, signifying good luck for the lady and bad luck for the males.

Arriving in Kiṣkindhā, Rāma told Sugrīva: "Friend, if Vāli seeks me and seeks my refuge, I cannot refuse his request. But I already gave you my solemn word that I would kill him. So I suggest I hit Vāli unseen by him."

Both Sugrīva and Haṇumān were pleased with Rāma's sagacity and felt that he was really the very symbol of righteousness.

As directed by Rāma, Sugrīva went up to the city gate of Kiṣkindhā and bellowed, as a challenge to Vāli. Vāli was with his wife Tārā and both heard that ferocious call. Vāli was severely offended at thus being disturbed and wanted to run up to Sugrīva to punish him straightaway.

But Tārā, a thoughtful lady, advised him against hasty action.

COUNSEL

Tārā heard that Sugrīva obtained the help of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, and realized that Sugrīva would not soon have returned to the fight unless he was sure of his success. She also learnt that the sons of Daśaratha were the fruits of divine favour and that no power on earth could withstand their prowess.

So she told Vāli: "Lord, anger and haste are the roots of all evil. There must be some strong reason for Sugrīva's quick return after the beating he got from you yesterday. Our son Aṅgada, when he went ahunting, heard from spies that Sugrīva is being aided by the valiant sons of King Daśaratha, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Rāma is the greatest refuge of those who seek his help:

*Nivāsa vṛkṣaḥ sādḥūnām āpannānām parā gatih,
Ātānām saṁśrayaścaiva yaśasaścaikabhājanam.*

"Please do not court the enmity of such a hero."

Tārā talked about the helplessness of Sugrīva in formerly accepting the kingship of Kiṣkindhā during Vāli's absence, and tried to convince him about Sugrīva's innocence in the whole matter. She also reminded her husband of the way Sugrīva loved and respected him all along. She repeatedly stressed that if he had any evil intentions, he would have imprisoned her and Aṅgada and ordered his men to kill Vāli on his return from the fight with Māyāvī.

All these wise words merely further infuriated Vāli. He said: "Tārā, how foolish you are! I would rather die than flinch from accepting Sugrīva's challenge. If, as you say, Sugrīva was my well-wisher, why did he not make Aṅgada the crown prince and

merely act as his regent? As for his welcoming ■■■ to the throne on my return, he had no choice in the matter because he knew neither he nor his followers had the strength to conquer me. However, ■ assure you that I love my brother and that I may not kill him. ■ shall try to teach him a lesson and see that he would never again dare challenge me. As for Rāma, I do not think he will harm me causelessly. Don't worry, and wish ■■■ good luck. I shall come back to you like ■ conquering hero."

Tārā felt bad omens. When bad luck was imminent, she knew, people would not listen to good advice. Crying helplessly, she entered her bedroom.

Raging and fretting like a wounded lion, Vāli approached Sugrīva. Both began fighting, using their utmost skill and strength. Both were by birth mighty and ferocious, and the duel turned out to be extremely bloody. Vāli put on his charmed golden garland on this occasion, and thanks to its powers was able to weaken the power of Sugrīva and subdue him. In fact, Sugrīva almost came to the end of his tether; if Rāma wouldn't come to his rescue, soon his end would come. So prayerfully he turned to where Rāma was standing.

DEATH SENTENCE

Rāma noticed Sugrīva's plight and realized the time had come for him to keep his word. He flung at Vāli the charmed weapon that Agastya gave him. The missile tore into Vāli's heart and blood started gushing up. Like a mighty tree uprooted in ■ windstorm, Vāli fell to the ground in a swoon. However, because of the powers of his golden garland the brightness in his features was not gone. In fact, the hero who falls in fight is the most beautiful of all creation.

After ■ while, Vāli came to. He saw the arrow that struck his heart; Rāma's name was inscribed on it. Instead of getting angry, Vāli was pleased with his lot. He was a great hero and a sporting fighter. He had always been ■■■ of his invincibility, and so he was not jealous of the greater hero who taught him a lesson and at whose hands he was to meet his end. He realized the folly of his that ■■■ to this end. He was sorry for not minding Tārā's counsel,

and he knew that his greatest enemies were the seven deadly sins that mastered him in his wronging of his own brother and sister-in-law.

The repentant Vāli wanted to take a look at Rāma before leaving this world. Rāma too had a wish to see this mighty foe at close quarters. Accordingly, he went up to him, accompanied by Lakṣmaṇa

Vāli saw them and bowed to them reverently. Rāma's visage was shining with divine splendour. Vāli shed tears of joy on gazing at it. He thought: "Verily, this is the personification of divinity. Now I can understand the words of Tārā who described the divine powers of this man."

He said aloud: "Rāma, I consider myself very fortunate to have been able to look at you. My wife Tārā told me all about you. I now appreciate that you are the embodiment of Truth, Justice and Righteousness. I understand you consider it your duty to punish the wicked and save the virtuous. I have paid the penalty for my greed and for not listening to the voice of reason. Of course, I never did any harm to you knowingly; if I did any unintentionally, forgive me. I am one of those unfortunate wicked kings who turn ■ deaf ear to the wise words of their consorts and ministers. I should have helped you in your search for Sītā. But I had not had the good fortune."

Rāma's arrow was having its disastrous effect on Vāli. In his final moments he was only filled with devotional thoughts of Rāma and silently praying to him.

Rāma said: "Great monkey-lord, I am sorry I had to kill you. But you know you had been wicked in wronging your own brother and in not respecting your wife's advice. You have stolen your brother's wife. All this had brought you to this state. It is my duty to serve the virtuous and finish the ill-natured. This duty is part of the universal, eternal Dharma which cannot be perceived by our material knowledge but can be understood only through the realization of the divine in our inmost selves:

*Sūkṣmaḥ paramadurjñeyaḥ satām dharmāḥ Plavangama,
Hṛdisthaḥ sarvabhūtānām ātmā veda śubhāśubham.*

The king is the representative of God's rule on earth. In meeting one's end at the hands of this deputy of God, man is freed from the evil effects of his bad actions. So I used the charmed weapon against you in the interests of yours as well as mine."

Vāli appreciated Rāma's explanation and replied: "Rāma, you are fully aware of the laws of justice. Your words are authoritative. Forgive me my sins. Now I have one final request. My real heir is my sole offspring, Aṅgada. Kindly treat him as one of your own kith and kin and crown him king of Kiṣkindhā."

"Vāli, forget your past and entertain no vain hopes for the future. Thereby you are sure to attain salvation. Now, please be sure that I will take every care of Aṅgada: he is as dear to me as Sugrīva," replied Rāma.

Vāli was immensely pleased and gratified. He inwardly thanked God for enabling him to die at the hands of Rāma.

Verily the story of Vāli and Sugrīva teaches us that one cannot ever escape the effects of one's deeds. Even as Vāli had to pay with his life for his greater sins, Sugrīva also had to suffer for the lesser ones of usurping his elder brother's throne, albeit at the request of the people, and of not keeping his promise of awaiting Vāli's return from inside the valley, even indefinitely.

However, all this led to the friendship of Sugrīva and Rāma, which has become ■ byword.

Here, Tārā learnt that Vāli died of the wound inflicted by Rāma's arrow. She was crestfallen. Vāli was her whole world. Even her beloved son Aṅgada could not take the place of her dear husband. Both grief-stricken mother and son went to where Vāli was lying dead.

TĀRĀ'S LAMENT

Tārā threw herself upon the corpse and began to cry: "Lord, here I am, your wedded wife Tārā. Here by my side is our dear ■■■ Aṅgada. Oh, my own lord and master, just for once open your eyes and look at us!

"Oh, why should a great hero like you remain helpless and lifeless in the battlefield? Is this all due to my bad luck? Or else why was I unable to convince you of your folly in wronging Sugrīva?"

Turning to Aṅgada, she said: "Dear boy, your father, who used to pamper you and fulfil every wish of yours, is now gone. God alone is now your refuge."

Addressing Sugrīva, she said: "Brother, Vāli never intended to kill you. That was why he merely banished you and in your duels, when he had the chance to kill you, he did not do so. Now this noble has gone to heaven. You may take back your wife Rumā and enjoy yourself in her company. You are now the king of Kiṣkindhā. As for me, I have no interest in life without Vāli. I shall fast unto death and join my husband in heaven. Oh God, please take good care of my son Aṅgada!"

At this point Hanumān tried to console her: "Mother, you are the queen of the great Kiṣkindhā king, Vāli. You are quite alive to the laws of justice. Your husband has stolen Rumā even while her husband was alive. Those who are guilty of such sins are rightly awarded the death penalty. Still, there is no need for you to weep and despair. All life is mortal, and there is no point in weeping for the dead or the living:

*Śocyā śocyasi kam śocyam dīnam dīnā'nukampase,
Kasya ko vā'nuśocyo'sti dehe'smin budbudopame.*

You must not take your own life, but must live on till the Lord pleases to take you away. If only for the sake of the orphaned Aṅgada, you must bear your grief with fortitude. You may also try to get Aṅgada crowned king of Kiṣkindhā and then advise him in matters of State."

Hanumān's words were well-chosen. He was sagacious enough to please both Aṅgada and Sugrīva. Since Sugrīva himself did not conquer Vāli, and has no children of his own, it was only right that Aṅgada should be made the crown prince. That was why he spoke thus to console Tārā.

Tārā replied: "Great friend, I am afraid I cannot accept your advice. Sugrīva is the king; whether or not he chooses Aṅgada as

his heir, it is his business. Now he must arrange for Vāli's last rites. For my part I shall fast unto death and follow my lord."

REPENTANCE

Still a little life was left in Vāli, though his end was very near. When he again opened his eyes, it was Sugrīva whom he saw. He talked to him: "Sugrīva, we are the offspring of the same parents. I was foolish to mistreat you. As I am your elder, I cannot ask for your pardon. I can only say that my sins have found me out, and I have met my just punishment at Rāma's hands. I now request you to forget my past misdeeds. My son Aṅgada is like your own. Please take good care of him. If you promise to do so, my soul will truly rest in peace.

"Brother, Tārā, the daughter of great Suśeṣa, is a very wise woman. Please consult her in affairs of State. I have suffered for not doing so. Now set about the search for Sitā. Not only Aṅgada, but the whole of Kiṣkindhā also will aid you in this worthy endeavour. I am offering you the golden garland Indra gave me. This loses its powers if it is worn by a dead man. So please take it and wear it; it will make your foes lose their prowess when you face them. I take my leave of you. I am lucky in having found my death at Rāma's hands. I bless you finally."

Turning to Aṅgada, Vāli said: "Beloved son, please place your self in the hands of Sugrīva. From now on he will be like a father to you. Whether you like it or not, you must always obey his command. Never forsake him, and he will always treat you well. Be friendly with all those around you, and that will make you a happy, peaceful life. And serve Rāma. He is the true God for you. May God bless you!" Aṅgada replied suitably and bowed to his father's feet.

As for Sugrīva, he was deeply moved by Vāli's magnanimity and thanked him. Inwardly he told himself: "How good and great is my brother! While I was a slave to revenge and greed, and was prepared to kill him, he spared me. Even after learning that I was indirectly the cause of his death, he has offered me his charmed golden garland. How can I ever repay his debt? Surely, the only way I can thank him is to concede the kingdom of Kiṣkindhā to his

Vāli at last took his last breath. Only his mortal remains were left on the ground. Learning about his death, the whole populace of the kingdom gathered there to pay their homage. They all eulogised him for his past great deeds.

Tārā again began to cry: "Lord, not Aṅgada and I alone, but the whole of Kiṣkindhā mourns your loss. Even if I want to embrace you for the last time, Rāma's arrow in your chest is coming in the way. How wretched am I! But you, my lord, how lucky you are in leaving this mortal frame with the aid of Rāma's noble weapon! You have attained your salvation thereby. We the people of Kiṣkindhā still are bound by our mundane bonds and are miserable in losing you."

Tārā cried even louder and louder. Aṅgada by her side also was crying inconsolably. Seeing them, Sugrīva too was moved to tears. He scolded himself for having indirectly caused Vāli's death. Turning to Rāma, Sugrīva said: "Revered prince, you have fulfilled your promise; I am eternally obliged to you. But now I regret my role in bringing about my brother's end. It was only my material craving that made me commit this folly. My brother had always been generous; he could have killed me as and when he chose but refrained from doing so out of love for me. I do not deserve the kingdom which I have won by taking a sinful step.

"I have lost the confidence of Kiṣkindhā denizens because of my treachery to Vāli. I have no children of my own. Aṅgada is a great hero and is in every way worthy of succeeding his father. Even if I die there is no great loss to the kingdom or to you. Aṅgada and Tārā will rule Kiṣkindhā wisely, and several other heroes like Hanumān will help you look for Sītā Devī. Kindly permit me to enter the fire or spend the rest of my life like a hermit on mount Rṣyamūka.

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were pleased to note the brotherly love of Sugrīva. As for his wish to be freed from the obligation of helping them in the search for Sītā, they knew the momentary reaction to the loss of his brother that prompted it, and were not angry with him. Rāma duly consoled him.

Tārā was still lying unconsciously at the feet of Vāli. As Rāma approached her, Vāli's ministers woke her up.

Still shedding tears, Tārā saluted Rāma. She was struck by his divine magnetism and had no grouse against him for killing her lord. With folded hands she bowed to him and said: "Lord, I heard of you and your greatness. I am now happy to be able to see you for myself.

*Tvam aprameyaśca durāsadaśca,
Jitendriyaśca uttamadhārmikaśca.
Akshayya kīrtiśca vicakṣaṇaśca,
Kṣīti kṣamāvān kṣatajopamākṣaḥ.*

"Rāma, you are of unparalleled excellence. You know all the laws of truth and justice. You can distinguish between good and evil like a true sage. You have the patience of the earth. I do not have to describe my state to you.

"But you can understand how much I miss my lord and master, and how little value I set on my life without him. Just as you suffer from your separation from Sītā Devī, so do I, and even more, from that of the irreparable loss of my husband. Please kill me with another charmed weapon of yours so that I too may go to heaven along with my lord. You need not hesitate because you will not be guilty of the sin of killing a woman in my case. I voluntarily seek my end at your hands, for my place is by my husband.

"I tried my best to convince Vāli about the folly of courting your enmity. Sugrīva is a sagacious man and sought your help. Vāli was thoughtless, and paid the penalty for his folly. I bear you no grudge. I only request you to take care of Aṅgada. You are the protector of the whole universe; protecting him cannot be a burden to you."

WORDS OF CONSOLATION

Rāma was touched by Tārā's words. 'He could very well understand the extent of her loss and grief, from his own experience. And yet, he thought, how magnanimous and noble she was! She had no illwill for the man who killed her husband, and like a truly chaste wife wanted to join her lord even in death. Of course, he told himself, he had to punish Vāli not only because he promised Sugrīva to do so but also because those who steal

other men's wives have to be meted out the death penalty. However, he was sorry he had to separate Tārā from Vāli.

So he spoke to her thus: "Good lady, I appreciate your position. But you must realize that all our deeds are the result of our past actions, and we have to obey what has been predetermined by our Karma. Vāli had to obey his destiny. You are the noble wife of ■ great hero. Your son will be made king of Kiṣkindhā. You heard even Sugrīva agreeing to this. In fact, Sugrīva is grieving for Vāli as much as you are. You must live through your destined span of life and help Sugrīva, Aṅgada and myself with your wisdom and nobility."

Tārā was consoled. She was also convinced by Sugrīva's repentance and his willingness to crown Aṅgada. She was satisfied that Aṅgada's interests would be safeguarded by both Sugrīva and Rāma. She stood quietly, paying attention to Rāma's further moves.

Turning to all those surrounding Vāli's corpse, Rāma said: "Noble citizens of Kiṣkindhā, I am as grieved as you all are at Vāli's demise. But, as you all know, there is ■ higher power directing all our destinies according to our own past actions. We must not cry over what has been God's will and what is past. Vāli has paid his penalty, but at the same time attained his right to Heaven through his repentance and heroism. Let us not grieve any more for him."

Lakṣmaṇa then told Sugrīva: "Sir, please console yourself and make the arrangements for your brother's last rites. You must set ■■ example of heroic stoicism to Aṅgada and other denizens. They ■■ awaiting your orders."

Sugrīva pulled himself together and encouraged Aṅgada to bear with fortitude what has been predestined.

Then the ceremonial details concerning Vāli's cremation were attended to with solemn dignity and meticulous propriety. While the priests were reciting the scriptural hymns, Vāli's kith and kin placed wreaths at the feet of the corpse and bowed to the departed soul in great reverence.

As the corpse was placed on the bier, a loud cry of anguish rose from the assembled gathering. The tearful Sugrīva gave the funeral oration: "Friends and comrades, my brother Vāli was a great man and a valiant fighter. This is no time to judge his moral limitations. But whatever follies he committed, he did so merely as ■ plaything of fate. If he were not a really fortunate individual, he would not have met his death at the hands of the divine Rāma. For my part, I am suffering for my role in bringing about his demise. I have no children of my own. It is my wish that Aṅgada should be Vāli's successor. All that I want for myself is a peaceful life. Kindly permit me to go back to mount R̥ṣyamūka and perform penance."

The people of Kiṣkindhā were pleased with Sugrīva's sense of dignity and responsibility. While they admired his spirit of sacrifice, they could not see how the young and inexperienced Aṅgada could carry the burden of kingship on his shoulders without the help and guidance of Sugrīva. However, they knew Rāma would eventually advise Sugrīva, and were prepared to stand by his word.

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa led the cortege. The mortal remains of Vāli were taken to the cremation ground with kingly honours. The bier was strewn with various flowers, pieces of perfume and gold coins. At Rāma's command, Aṅgada lit the funeral pyre. As the holy fire was consuming Vāli's physical frame, the people around again began to sob.

This is the way of the world. Even the greatest among men must finally meet his end: the only difference is that those who achieve their greatness in the service of God ■■■ released from the cycle of birth and death, and that those who selfishly serve themselves find themselves caught in the web of reliving and re-dying.

All the mourners took ■ dip in the nearby lake. After the last rites were performed they and the royal visitors returned to their abodes.

CORONATION

Hanumān submitted to Rāma: "Lord, now Kiṣkindhā is kingless. Such a kingdom paves the way for anarchy. Kindly advise

■ as to whom we should choose as our ruler. Not only Sugrīva and Aṅgada, but all of us citizens also, will abide by your choice. After expressing your decision, please accompany us to the city of Kiṣkindhā. There we shall be honoured to have you and Lakṣmaṇa as our state guests.”

Rāma replied: “Dear friend, I am grateful to you for your kind invitation. But you must note that we are exiles and that we must not enter cities and towns during these fourteen years. As for the choice of the ruler, Sugrīva alone is the fit person. Aṅgada is still young. However, Sugrīva looks upon him as his own child, and so he will be made crown prince.”

Turning to Sugrīva, Rāma said: “As I just said, you are the right person to succeed Vāli, for Aṅgada is young and inexperienced. Please accept the crown and rule the people befittingly. Now it is the rainy season. As soon as autumn comes, we shall plan our attack on Rāvaṇa. Lakṣmaṇa and I will stay in the valley.

“I do not have to teach you statecraft. But as your well-wisher, I just want to say that you should honour the wise lady, your sister-in-law, and follow her advice; similarly, since Hanumān brought us two together, you should always trust him and respect him.”

Sugrīva thanked Rāma and accepted his advice. Bidding farewell to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa for the time being, he proceeded to the city. There he was given ■ great welcome by the citizens. Thanking the people duly, he entered the royal palace.

The next day Sugrīva’s coronation was performed in splendid style. The priests lit the holy fire and recited appropriate hymns. Sugrīva was seated on a diamond-studded gold throne, turning to the east. His ministers swore their allegiance to him, and the courtiers and visitors applauded: “Hail Sugrīva!” Sugrīva then initiated the ceremony of making Aṅgada the crown prince.

After the coronation, Sugrīva and his queen Rumā went up to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to express their gratitude and gratification. The brothers offered their blessing to the couple,

The Kiṣkindhā king and queen returned to their palace. Sugrīva thereafter reigned over the kingdom, with the best interests of the people at heart

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa chose a quiet spot in the R̥ṣyamūka valley and built their temporary home there. As Rāma was describing to Lakṣmaṇa the beauty of the surroundings, and talking of Sugrīva's reunion with Rūma, he was reminded of Sītā and of the happy time he had with her in Ayodhyā. The memory saddened Rāma. Lakṣmaṇa duly consoled him.

The rains have brought new life to the scorched earth. All around, the flora and fauna were fulfilling their symbiotic function. The separation from Sītā was therefore all the more intolerable to Rāma. But his devoted brother and companion Lakṣmaṇa was always by his side, encouraging him and counselling patience till the monsoon was over.

Thus the rainy season passed by. Sugrīva was not only enjoying himself with his wedded wife but was also cohabiting with Tāra. He was so immersed in his love-life that he forgot his promise to Rāma.

Hanumān was worried about this king's behaviour. At an opportune moment he approached Sugrīva and told him: "Lord, please do not forget that it was through the help of Rāma that you regained your wife and gained your kingdom. You owe a debt of gratitude to him; you have to repay it ■ ■ matter of duty and civility. Not that he really needs your help: he alone can kill Rāvaṇa. But he wants to help many other good people in the process. He wants to see how worthy you are of his trust. He himself will not come begging for your assistance, because he is a scion of the great warrior race. Please take up earnestly the job of searching for Sītā Devī. You yourself need not go out; only commission the most trusted of your followers. I am sure they are capable of bringing back news of Sītā Devī wherever she is."

Sugrīva was ashamed of himself; he agreed to Hanumān's proposal.

Sugrīva called his commander-in-chief Nīla and ordered him: Gather your armies and get ready for the fight within a fortnight.

If any one of the soldiers disobeys orders he will be summarily executed. This is my command. Please convey this news to Aṅgada and other advisers of mine."

At this end, Rāma saw the dawn of autumn and yet found no sight of Sugrīva. He found himself further anguished by the separation from Sītā, because of the beautiful moonlit nights of the season. He tortured himself with the thoughts of the sweet moments he spent with Sītā on such nights, while the whole nature seemed to co-operate with them in their mutual delight.

One day Lakṣmaṇa, returning from the forest where he went to gather fruits and other victuals, found Rāma in ■■■ extremely dejected mood. He reassured Rāma that no harm could be done to the noble Sītā of firelike chastity by Rāvaṇa, and asked him to concentrate his attention on finding her and not on vain moping.

Rāma replied: "I agree with you, brother. But Sugrīva has not yet turned up to fulfil his promise. If he fails me he would certainly pay for his folly with his life and kingdom."

SOFT WORDS

The easily irascible Lakṣmaṇa was quick to take offence at Sugrīva's negligence. He vowed that he would straightaway go and kill him, and seek Aṅgada's help in finding Sītā.

Lakṣmaṇa's anger calmed down Rāma and awakened his native equanimity. He said: "Lakṣmaṇa, never lose your ■■■ of proportion even when provoked. And never kill ■ friend, even if he temporarily betrays you. I still have faith in Sugrīva. Please speak to him like a friend."

Lakṣmaṇa was pacified by Rāma's words. But ■■ he went up to Kiṣkindhā his eyes were still bloodshot, and the messengers of Sugrīva were frightened by his appearance. They immediately ■■■ up to Sugrīva, who was enjoying himself in the company of Tārā, and conveyed to him the news of Lakṣmaṇa's arrival. But the drunken king would not pay heed to their words. Then they told the advisers about the situation. They in turn asked Aṅgada to meet Lakṣmaṇa and find out the ■■■ for his visit.

Aṅgada realized that Lakṣmaṇa appeared before him only because Sugrīva forgot the good done to him by Rāma. So he approached Lakṣmaṇa apologetically and with tears in his eyes. Lakṣmaṇa took pity on the boy, whose welfare Rāma and he promised to his dying father. He asked Aṅgada to convey the news of his arrival to Sugrīva.

Then Aṅgada requested two of Sugrīva's chief advisers, Plakṣa and Prabhāva, to remind their master of his sworn word. They went and told Sugrīva: "Lord, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are the embodiments of truth and justice. You must not break your promise to them. Lakṣmaṇa is at the gate waiting to see you. Please receive him with due honours or else the whole race of the monkeys will be extinct."

Sugrīva replied: "Friends, I do not see how I offended Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Perhaps my enemies have indulged in scandal-mongering. I have already asked Nīla to commission his army in Rāma's aid."

Understanding the situation, the wise Hanumān then reasoned: "Lord, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa might have been offended by the fact that you did not visit them soon after the rains ceased, as you promised you would. Please meet Lakṣmaṇa humbly and apologize to him for your oversight." Sugrīva then asked Aṅgada to go back and fetch Lakṣmaṇa.

Here Lakṣmaṇa was impatient at the delay in meeting Sugrīva. He could hear the sounds of revelry from inside Sugrīva's palace and was much angered. He struck his bowstring hard. The monkey population was scared by the resulting high sound. Even Rāma could hear that sound at a distance. He hoped Lakṣmaṇa would keep in mind his counsel and would do nothing hasty. Rāma also cogitated that if Sugrīva forgot himself in his luxury, his consellers and the wise Tārā would not fail in reminding him of his promise. However, Rāma told himself that it was ultimately right not to depend on others and that Lakṣmaṇa, after all, by himself could rescue Sītā and punish Rāvaṇa.

Returning to the harem, Sugrīva heard the sound and told Tārā: "Lakṣmaṇa seems to be very angry. I don't understand what

harm I have done Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Anyway, go and pacify him, for he is a chivalrous man and wouldn't hurt a woman."

Tārā herself was still in an intoxicated state, as she approached Lakṣmaṇa. Lakṣmaṇa bent his head in disgust as he saw her. He regretted the fickleness of the monkey race: she who was prepared to join her husband on the funeral pyre was now enjoying herself in her brother-in-law's bed.

The naturally sagacious Tārā spoke without fumbling, despite her drunken state: "Sir, we dare not offend you. So why should you frighten our people? We are prepared to obey your every wish. Please tell us what the matter is."

Lakṣmaṇa replied: "Tārā, I am here only because I have the interests of your race at heart. Sugrīva has not only forgotten his promise to the divine Rāma but also forsook his sacred duty by his people in his pleasure-mongering. You are ■ wise woman. Do you think it was proper on his part to delay his help to Rāma and spend his time in drunken torpor?"

Tārā reviewed the entire situation. She saw how indifferent Sugrīva had been to Rāma's cause and how ungrateful he was to the man who was instrumental in restoring his wife to him. And yet, she knew that Sugrīva was not by nature ■■ ingrate. She said: "Prince, you know all the rules of law and justice. You are the personification of virtue and goodwill. Is it fair that you should thus frighten ■ weaker person like Sugrīva who, although he was ■ slave to his senses, never really forgot his purpose or promise? At Hanumān's suggestion he already ordered his troops to be prepared for the search of Sītā Devī. Please bear with him. He welcomes you. We are not strangers to you. You may come in and meet him, for he is afraid and ashamed of meeting you of his own accord."

As Lakṣmaṇa acceded to Tārā's request and entered Sugrīva's palace, he found him inebriated. Lakṣmaṇa was sorry to see that Sugrīva, for all his good intentions, was still passionbound. So he warned Sugrīva that, while he himself did not mind in whichever way Sugrīva conducted himself in private life, it was the king's duty to set an example of sobriety and integrity of character to his

people. As Sugrīva himself was still unprepared to answer Lakṣmaṇa's words, Tārā replied on his behalf: "Prince Lakṣmaṇa, Sugrīva is by nature not a profligate. He had for long suffered in exile. Now, at last, he is enjoying a little freedom. Naturally he has missed his married life so long that he is now making up for lost time. You know how hard it is to control one's natural impulses. Even ■ great sage like Viśvāmitra succumbed to the charms of Menakā, and forsook his penance for a while. Then is it strange that the monkey race, which is by nature fickle, should follow its instincts? However, I assure you that Sugrīva is not unalive to his promise to Rāma, and if need be he will leave Rumā, me and even his kingdom to keep it. He may be excused for not calling on you all these days, but he wanted to see you only after his troops were gathered for the fight. Still, I beg of you to forgive him for his momentary lapse."

Lakṣmaṇa calmed down. Sugrīva was relieved to see him satisfied. To make himself presentable, he threw away all his cosmetic appurtenances. He was really contrite, and Lakṣmaṇa's words went home to him. He was sorry for neglecting the solemn promise he made, in his preoccupation with bodily pleasures. He said "Prince Lakṣmaṇa, I am quite aware of the fact that it was only through the help of Rāma I have regained my wife and kingdom. I also know that Rāma does not really need my help. But still I am grateful to your brother for having given me a chance of being useful to him. I am your servant. I may be forgiven my folly. However, I may say that I have already instructed my hordes to be prepared for the invasion of Lanka."

Lakṣmaṇa replied: "Dear friend, I quite appreciate your position. I was rather worried over my brother's agony and wanted to see you more alert. And then I had to tell you certain words of wisdom because I saw you place the comforts of person above the services to your people. So make yourself presentable, come and cheer up Rāma."

Sugrīva was pleased with Lakṣmaṇa's words. Calling upon Hanumān he said: "Friend, we are all now determined on helping Rāmā find Sītā Devī. There is no power on earth that can now save Rāvaṇa. Rāma is our father. Sītā is our mother, Lakṣmaṇa is our friend—let us give our all for these divine people."

Hanumān was thrilled. This wisest individual among the monkey race understood Rāma more than any other person. To him Rāma is everything. So he was extremely delighted that Sugrīva realized the importance of being useful to Rāma. He, therefore, again relayed Sugrīva's call for the army to assemble at Kiṣkindhā. Accordingly all the forces gathered and took their positions.

After inspecting the armed forces, Sugrīva left for mount Prasravaṇa' along with Lakṣmaṇa, in a golden palanquin. As they reached their destination, they got down from the palanquin and went on foot to greet Rāma.

Rāma was deeply immersed in the thoughts of Sītā; his inner voice assured him she was alive and well.

The sound of approaching footsteps woke him from his reverie. He was happy to see Lakṣmaṇa return with Sugrīva. He embraced them both fondly. Rāma told Sugrīva: "Friend, you have done well in freeing yourself from the shackles of Desire (Kāma), for ■ king should not occupy himself with it alone but must attend to his Duty (Dharma) and Material Purpose (Artha) with due diligence. Autumn has come. Now we must prepare to punish Rāvaṇa."

Sugrīva replied: "Lord, by your grace I am in a happy position. I and my people have placed our services at your disposal. We are prepared to go through any sacrifice for your sake. Please command us."

Pleased, Rāma said: "Just as the sun drives away darkness, the moon delights the world with her light, and the air god offers comfort and sustenance to the living creatures, so does friendship bind two understanding hearts together. Now Rāvaṇa's end is assured."

At that moment, the monkey commanders Nīla, Indrajānu, Dambha, Durmukha and others arrived on the scene, followed by innumerable soldiers. Sugrīva introduced them to Rāma, and they all paid their respects and ■■■■ their allegiance to Rāma.

Addressing his men, Sugrīva said: "Friends and Comrades, I admire your sense of duty. You ■■■ here to help ■ great hero who

destroy not only Rāvaṇa but the whole world well, single-handed. He has merely favoured with his grace, so that we too share the worthy burden of punishing the wicked people like Rāvaṇa. We should aid in our humble way this divine personage in recovering his divine consort, the noble lady, Sītā Devī.

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, as well as all his men, were pleased with Sugrīva's call.

Turning to Rāma, Sugrīva said: "Lord, my soldiers have gathered from all corners in their full strength. They are mighty heroes who never tasted defeat. We are now awaiting your orders."

Rāma replied: "Friend, I am quite satisfied with your loyalty and your army's preparedness. Before we actually set about fighting Rāvaṇa, we have to find Sītā's whereabouts. First devise ways and means of tracing her."

SUGRĪVA'S ORDERS

Then Sugrīva commissioned his army for the search. He ordered four commanders to take their armies to the four corners of the earth and return with news of Sītā within thirty days. He threatened severe punishment if the stipulated period was exceeded.

He sent Vinata to the east, Sushena and Mārīca to the west, and Śatāvali to the north. Since he was sure that Sītā was taken southwards, he asked his best followers to go in that direction. Turning to Aṅgada, he said: "You, Nīla, Jāmbavān, Hanumān, Suhotra, Śārāri, Śaragulma, Gaja, Gavākṣa, Gavaya, Rṣabha, Mainda, Dvidida, Vijaya, Gandhamādana, Ulkāmkha and Asaṅga must go southwards and fulfil Rāma's errand. Whoever among you return with the news of finding Sītā Devī will be given a status equalling mine."

Sugrīva trusted Hanumān more than any one else. So he specially spoke to him: "Hanumān, you are the wisest of us. There is nothing you do not know and nowhere you cannot enter. I know

in my heart of hearts that you, all by yourself, will be seeing Sītā Devī first. I also know that you revere Rāma ■ your God and that Rāma has a special love for you. So it is befitting that you should succeed in this search for the divine Sītā Devī. I wish you godspeed and good luck."

Hanumān was moved by his chief's confidence in him. He told himself that his highest duty was to fulfil Sugrīva's wish and prove himself worthy of his king, his race and his God Rāma. He made up his mind to bring back news of Sītā Devī within the scheduled period, and even to kill Rāvaṇa, if needed.

Hearing Sugrīva's words, Rāma was very much gratified and thought that the former was the epitome of true friendship. As soon as he regained his kingdom, Rāma told himself, he would duly reward Sugrīva for his gracious help.

Hanumān bowed to Rāma's feet. As he bent down, tears of joy fell from Rāma's eyes on his head. They were indeed the drops of ambrosia. Hanumān felt that he was for ever blessed. He said: "Lord, my heart is full of you. Some divine grace has entered ■■ as your tears of joy dropped on my head. It is this grace that further encourages me on my quest and assures ■■■ of success. Sītā is my mother; you are my father. It is my sole aim to bring you together and also to ■■■ that your friendship with Sugrīva will not be in vain. I take my leave of you. Bless me with your words, too."

The pleased Rāma replied, giving Hanumān his ring: "Hanumān, I thank you for your affection and devotion. Now, this is the ring that King Janaka presented ■■■ on the occasion of my wedding to Sītā. If she sees this in your hands, she will accept you as my true messenger. Please tell her from me that I am living on, only in the hope of rejoining her and that, with the help of Sugrīva, I will come there and rescue her, after killing Rāvaṇa. Besides finding her whereabouts, also gauge the strength of Rāvaṇa and his army, for it is always right to know the foe's powers before attacking him. May God bless you."

VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

Hanumān, Aṅgada and others took leave of Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sugrīva and went southwards. They proceeded ■ ■

mighty pace: the princes and the king were amazed at their speed and kept on gazing at them till they were out of sight.

The monkey leaders who went in other directions returned before the fixed period, without any news of Sītā. Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sugrīva saw from their faces that they were unsuccessful. Rāma was much distressed. Lakṣmaṇa and Sugrīva tried to cheer him up, with the assurance that it was towards the south Sītā was taken away.

Rāma felt somewhat reassured, for he remembered that even the friend of his father, Jaṭāyu, told him that that was the way that Rāvaṇa flew.

The party that went south left not a nook or corner left unsearched all along the way. On their way they had to pass through a dark valley. There they ran into a fierce-looking demon. Aṅgada mistook him for Rāvaṇa himself. The demon no sooner tried to jump on him that Aṅgada gave him a mighty blow on the back. That one stroke was enough to kill the demon. The others in the party were fortified by this instant conquest and were sure that it was a good omen for their search. They ransacked the whole valley in the hope of finding Sītā, but in vain.

Seeing his party momentarily dejected, Aṅgada addressed them; "Heroic friends, our time is fast running out. This is no time for regrets or rest. Rāma and Sugrīva placed a great trust in our hands. We must not fail them. If we return without news of Sītā Devī, Rāma will kill himself; then Lakṣmaṇa will follow suit: our king Sugrīva would not then hesitate to give up his life also. In such an eventuality what will be the fate of Kiṣkindhā? And what will be our own fate?"

Aroused by Aṅgada's exhortation, the party set out further south with renewed determination.

SVAYAMPRAKHA

As they proceeded a little farther they found a den. There also they hoped to find Sītā; again their search was futile. They rested there for a while. Later, going in search of fresh water they

entered ■ beautiful wood. That is Māya's Kāñcana garden. There they met an old holy woman. She is the guardian of the wood. She shone with brilliant holiness. Hanumān saw that they could trust her and, telling her the nature of their errand, asked her to direct them to where they could find fresh drinking water. Then she herself offered them water and nourishing food. They thanked her heartily. She replied that she only did her duty.

At Hanumān's request she began telling her story: "This garden and the palace ■■■ there belong to the divine architect Maya. When the lord of gods, Indra, killed him, his wife Hemā inherited this property. She is my friend and has entrusted me with the care of this garden. I am named Svayamprabhā."

Thanking her for her hospitality, Hanumān asked her to tell them the easy way out of that hollow den. She asked them to close their eyes. Before they opened their eyes they found themselves safely carried out of the den. Once out, they saw that they were surrounded by ■ mighty ■■■ and were consequently disheartened.

Then Aṅgada told his comrades: "The time set for ■■ to return to Kiṣkindhā is almost over. We have not yet succeeded in our efforts. Sugrīva is ■■■ to kill ■■ for failing him. By the grace of Rāma, he made ■■■ the crown prince, but now he has an opportunity of taking his revenge on ■■ who am the ■■■ of Vāli, his former tormentor. Rather than get cruelly killed by him, let us fast to death like noble martyrs."

The rest of the party agreed to Aṅgada's proposal, with the exception of an old monkey named Tāra. He said: "You need not fast unto death. The same noble lady Svayamprabhā who helped us get out of that hollow den would now come to our rescue if we seek refuge. She will keep us in ■ place where neither the Ayodhyā princes ■■■ the Kiṣkindhā king ■■■ ever find us."

But Aṅgada was not satisfied with such an escapist policy. He was a noble youth. He was imbued with the ideals of personal integrity and moral probity. He was by nature of greater strength of character than his heroic parent. So he could not bring himself to resort to such a ■■■.

PROS AND CONS

Hanumān then told Aṅgada: "Prince, you are the son of the former mighty king Vāli. Is it right that you should give way to defeatism? How can these monkey soldiers live here, leaving behind their wives and children in Kiṣkindhā? Do you want to bring down the enmity of Sugrīva on you? You must also note that the commanders Nīla, Jāmbavān, Suhotra and myself cannot swear allegiance to you, for we have already done so to Sugrīva. Besides, this den is not all that impenetrable: Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa have arrows that pierce even the strongest of rocks and dens. In any case, you need not be so fearful of Sugrīva's vengeance. He regrets the death of Vāli and he made you his crown prince; he certainly will not punish you, for he, being childless, treats you as his son. It is not too late to continue our quest. Let us not entertain baseless doubts about Sugrīva, but persist in our efforts."

Aṅgada was not convinced. He retorted: "Hanumān, I cannot accept your views on Sugrīva. He is a wily man. He was instrumental in bringing about my father's death, and he is sinfully seduced my mother after my father's death. Even after receiving so much help from Rāma, he forgot his obligation and was enjoying himself like a libertine: it was only his fear of Lakṣmaṇa that brought him to his senses. At any rate, has he not told us that capital punishment would be meted out to us if we would not return to mount Prasravaṇa before the end of the thirty days? I know you are a faithful follower of Sugrīva: you would like to go back to him. But I am the son of a proud hero: I cannot go back to Sugrīva as a failure. You and those who agree with you may go back. But I will remain here and fast unto death. Please convey my last farewell to the people of Kiṣkindha."

Aṅgada's words pierced Hanumān's heart like an arrow. He persisted: "Dear Aṅgada, your misgivings are ill-founded. Sugrīva did not plot Vāli's death. He awaited Vāli's return at the dengate for a long time; only when there was no hope of his return did Sugrīva go back to Kiṣkindhā. He accepted the rule only at the behest of the people and was willing to give back the kingship to Vāli if and when he would reappear. As for Sugrīva's seduction of your mother, it is a sort of kingly game; your father abducted Sugrīva's wife, and Vāli himself recommended Sugrīva's company

to Tārā just before his death. We must not judge what is permissible among races like ours and in kingly tit-for-tat. You yourself saw that Sugrīva accepted the kingship of Kiṣkindhā only when pressed by Rāma and that he wanted you to be the king. Now that he has solemnly made you the crown prince, would not Kiṣkindhā suffer for the lack of a worthy heir if you commit suicide? If Sugrīva for ■ while forgot his obligation to Rāma, it was also due to the natural weakness of the monkey race. Let us stop blaming and doubting Sugrīva and go on our quest. We are sure to succeed sooner or later, and if we convey good news the time limit punishment will be waived."

Aṅgada heard Hanumān's words patiently, and regretted the follies of his elders. He thought Hanumān's counsel was well-meant but could not hope to live with the thought of the failure of his mission. So he took ■ dip in the sea and, seated on the grass, began his fast unto death.

The monkey soldiers began to cry at the thought of the end of their beloved prince. Then they were also reminded of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, and it made them further desolate. Their wailings filled the air.

SAMPĀTI

In a nearby valley Jaṭāyu's brother Sampāti was living. He heard the wails of the monkey army. Coming out of his shelter he saw them fasting unto death and was happy that he could feed off their bodies ■■■ per day. He declared aloud his feelings to them. The words frightened Aṅgada and his followers. Oh! the might of self-preservation! Even those fasting to death were afraid of the consequences of death!

Aṅgada said to Hanumān: "That vulture-king is prepared to eat all of us. Perhaps he is an aide of the death-king Yama. Even the old Jaṭāyu courted death fighting with Rāvaṇa. Both birds and beasts seem to co-operate with ■■■ in doing Rāma's work.

Hanumān was amused at Aṅgada's words. Whereas, Sampāti, learning the ■■■ of his brother's death, was grieved. So he wanted to know why Jaṭāyu fought with Rāvaṇa, and assured the

monkeys that he would do them no harm. He asked Aṅgada to help him come down from the mountain peak where he was seated. Aṅgada trusted him and did as wished by him; he told the bird-hero about all that happened till his present wish for self-immolating fast.

Sampāti was deeply touched by the story, and thought: "How strange are the ways of Providence that even Rāma had to suffer such hardships! How lucky was my brother in sacrificing himself on behalf of Rāma and in getting cremated by that divine incarnation himself! How I wish I too could help Rāma!"

Then he began telling his story to Aṅgada: "Once my brother and I wanted to reach the sun. As we approached the sun, the heat became unbearable to Jaṭāyu, and he fainted; as I tried to cover him with my wings, I too suffered a similar fate. Then I fell down from this mountain and lost my power of flight. Please tell me in which way I can be of some use to Rāma."

Aṅgada replied: "Please tell me if you know Sītā's whereabouts. By the power of your speech you can do your bit for Rāma."

Gratified, Sampati said: "I know very well where Rāvaṇa lives. I too heard the wails of a helpless woman from the skies as she was being abducted. But I couldn't help her because of my disability. I will now tell you about Rāvaṇa and how you can reach his kingdom.

"Rāvaṇa is the son of Viśravasa, the brother of Kubera (God of Wealth). About five hundred kilometres from here is the isle of Laṅkā. In that island is built the town of Laṅkā by the divine architect Viśvakarmā.

"There are seven roads to Laṅkā. The divine bird Garuḍa can go there fastest by the aerial route; so does Aruṇa. My brother and I were born into the family of Aruṇa. By our inherent power we can see a distance of five hundred kilometres; I am now actually able to see Sītā Devī from here. She is placed in solitary confinement in the Aśoka garden; she is clad in a worn-out garment and is crying all the time. If you go there you can see her for yourselves. Then bring back to Rāma the news of Sītā Devī. Rāma will then go and kill Rāvaṇa, the tormentor of Sītā Devī and the murderer of my brother."

Āṅgada and his men were delighted with Sampāti's words. They carried him near the sea waters, where he offered oblations with water to his departed brother. Then they carried him back to his mountain resort.

All the monkeys were pleased with the confirmation of Sītā's safety by Sampāti. Jāmbavān was a little more curious and asked the blessed bird if he knew any others who saw Sītā being carried away.

Sampāti replied: "Yes, my son Supārśva too saw Rāvaṇa and Sītā Devī. But it so happened that he did not know their identity when he actually saw them. It happened like this. One day he went to fetch me food. He was very late in returning home. Angered, I asked him the reason for the delay. He then told me that he was held up by a man, escorting ■ woman, and that the man, simulating obedience and speaking softly, could escape unhurt—because at first my son wanted to kill the ■■■■ and the woman and bring them ■■ prey to me. Later he was told by the heavenly inhabitants who witnessed the incident that that man was Rāvaṇa and that that lady was Sītā Devī.

"Ah yes, I forgot to tell you a little more about myself. I knew by the grace of sage Nisākara, whose refuge and help I sought after being wounded by the sun's heat, that I would one day convey the news of Sītā Devī to you. He it was that saved me from committing suicide in my helpless state. He said that if I would be patient and live a little longer I could be of use to Rāma and that after completing this mission of mine I would regain the power of flight."

As Sampāti told this, his wings recovered their original strength, and in order to prove their efficacy, he flew up into the sky. The monkeys saw that miracle and were further convinced that all that Sampāti told about how Sītā Devī was being fed by the food supplied by Indra (as she refuses food given by Rāvaṇa) was true. Encouraged and enthusiastic, the monkey horde began running towards the south and reached the seashore at the extreme end.

There they felt nonplussed. Seeing their plight, Āṅgada said: "Comrades, don't be discouraged. Please be strong-willed. There

is always a way out of any predicament as long as we do not lose faith in ourselves."

The monkeys spent a restless night. The next morning Aṅgada ordered his **mon** to come together. He told them it would be best for one of them, who is capable of crossing the ocean, to go to Laṅkā. He asked those who think they could do this to come forward.

None dared come forward. Aṅgada chided them that the **mon** reputed for its matchless courage should now reveal such diffidence. Then Jāmbavān stood up and said that, though he could fly for four hundred kilometres, he had not the ability to complete the return trip. He added: "Prince, you yourself will be able to perform this feat. But as you are our leader you must depute someone in whom you have faith: so please pickup one yourself."

Aṅgada replied: "Jāmbavan, you are the most experienced among us. Please advise me. I **mon** prepared to sacrifice myself for Rāma's sake; but I know if we return successfully the time-bound punishment would not be meted out. So who according to you is the fit person?"

Jāmbavān said: "I will tell you right now." Then he turned towards Hanumān who was silently meditating in a corner: "Hanumān, you are the greatest hero among our species. Nay, you **mon** even the peer of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa; you **mon** the equal of Garuḍa in flying. Now our reputation is at stake and you alone **mon** save it. Why are you quiet?"

"I do not have to remind you of your divine parentage. Your mother is the angel Añjanā and your father is Vāyu (God of Air). When you **mon** a boy you wanted to eat up the sun because you thought it was a fruit. But **mon** you reached the sunny region the jealous Indra struck you with his *Vajra* weapon and you fell down **mon** a mountain. Then your left cheek (*Hanu*) was wounded, and ever since you have been known as 'Hanumān'. That was all the simple hurt caused to you by such a mighty weapon. The admiring Indra gave you a boon that you could choose the moment of your death yourself. Brahmā granted that no weapon **mon** earth could kill you. When I **mon** young I could help the demi-gods when they

churned the ocean by bringing various herbs for the purpose from all parts of the world. But now I am old and weak. You have already brought Rāma and Sugrīva together. You alone are capable of finding Sītā and bringing her and Rāma together again."

INDIAN OCEAN

Hanumān heard the words with his eyes still half-closed in meditation. Realizing his own powers he increased his stature. Looking at that gigantic form his fellow soldiers began singing his praises. He was further thrilled and his every nerve and fibre revealed strong will and determined enthusiasm. He was shining with a mystic grace.

Turning to his comrades he said: "My inner voice assures me that I can find Sītā Devī. At Jāmbavān's request I am willing to cross this ocean and go to Laṅkā. If I like, I can fly around mount Meru a thousand times at a stretch. I can even exceed the speed of light. I can churn the seas and send up their waters into the sky. I can turn into powder the hugest mountain. By the force of my speed all the surrounding things will have to follow in my wake. Like lightning I can fly up into the sky in a second. I can subdue Indra, the lord of gods, and carry away his jar of nectar. So rest assured that flying to Laṅkā is a very simple matter to me. I can root out the island and pick it up and bring it here if I choose. Please bless me that I should come back successful."

They were all thrilled by Hanumān's courage. Jāmbavān said: "You have our blessings, Hanumān. We pray to God to help you on your way. When you come back Kiṣkindhā will give you its greatest welcome."

Mount Mahendra is a tough region. Hanumān was so strong that he could withstand the pressure of his feet when he would take his stance for the flight. Even so, when Hanumān set foot on it, the whole region shook up and with it the creatures living on and above it—the lakes overflowed; the trees were uprooted; the nymphs fled for shelter; the poisonous snakes hissed and, when jumped up into the air they resembled flags flying; even the phlegmatic sages were worried and left the place.

Praying to Rāma in his heart, Hanumān flew up into the sky and began his crossing of the Indian Ocean to learn the **■ṚṚṚ** about Sītā. The gods in heaven witnessed the sight and blessed him; they prayed to God for his success.

SUNDARA KĀṆḌA

CROSSING THE SEA

*Tato rāvaṇa nītāyāḥ sītāyāḥ śatrukarsaṇaḥ,
Iyeṣa pādām anveṣṭum cāraṇācarite pathi.'*

Obeying Jāmbavan's orders, Hanumān decided going to Laṅkā in search of Sītā.

He prepared himself mentally and physically for the feat of crossing the ocean, the flight of which he alone among living creatures is capable.

He offered prayers to the Sun and Brahman, to Indra and the deities representing the five elements. His heart was filled with the spirit of Rāma, and his whole physique was divinely animated and strengthened. The mighty ocean itself seemed to be no more than mere tank which he could cross with effortless ease.

And so, bidding farewell to his confreres, Jāmbavan and others, he said: "Friends and comrades, like Rāma's invincible arrow I shall fly unhampered to Rāvaṇa's Laṅkā. If I can't find Sītā there, I would even go to Heaven to look for her. And if I still can't her there, I would return to Laṅkā, and abduct not only Rāvaṇa but also his entire island, and carry them down here."

Then, chanting Rāma Nāma, he rose up into the sky with lightning speed. Mount Mahendra, from where he took his stance, shook under the pressure of Hanumān's gigantic swing. All the inanimate plant life found itself alive, and followed him for a distance, as though giving him a send-off, and before falling into the sea, gave him its blessings and promised to await the return of Sītā Devī. In his turn, Hanumān promised to bring back Sītā to Rāma without fail.

The sea, bedecked with these flowers and fruits, swelled with pleasure and pride. It welcomed Hanumān with its rising waves.

Proceeding upward, Hanumān flashed like lightning amidst the clouds. His arms, spread across the sky in their outstretched form, suggested the sight of a couple of cobras. When he bent his head, it appeared as though he would swallow the sea; when he lifted it up, as though he would devour the sky; his eyes shone like the **sun** and the **moon** rising at once; his **teeth** shone with the blood-red hue of the bright sun; his tail was redolent of Indra's flying flag.

*Lāṅgūlacakreṇa mahān śukladamṣṭro'nilātmajāḥ,
Vyārocata mahāprājñāḥ pariveśi iva bhāskaraḥ.*

And when he surrounded himself with his tail, it was like the **sun** surrounded by the radiation belt; his waist looked like **a** crimson herb. As he took his flight above the sea he resembled **a** comet spanning the whole sky. And in keeping pace with his upward surge, the sea creatures too began to come out from under the **sea** and to fly above it. As his shadow fell on the waters, it was **as** though a huge cloud was reflected by them. He could have been a flying mountain with wings, whose speed took the flitting clouds in its wake. He himself was like another moon playing hide-and-seek with the clouds.

Gods in heaven showered flowers on him. The sages sang his praises. Struck with awe Yakṣas, Kinnaras and Kimpuruṣas admired his valour.

The sea-god is grateful to the forefather of Rāma, Sagara, who contributed to his immensity. Therefore, seeing Hanumān go on Rāma's errand, he felt it **his** duty to give him all assistance.

So he addressed mount Maināka, hidden under his surface, thus: "O mountain-king, the ancestors of Rāma, of the Sun dynasty, are sacred to me, for **I** owe my very existence to them. Therefore let **me** see no pain is caused to Rāma's messenger, Hanumān.

*Kuru sāvivyam asmākam na naḥ kāryam atikramet,
Kartavyam akṛtam kāryam satām manyum udīrayet.*

If the deed is not done at the right moment, **one** might have to bear the brunt of good men's wrath. Even the birds and beasts are

crying over the lot of Sītā and Rāma, and are helping them as much as they can. What greater duty can we perform than being of use to these divine couple to the best of our ability? Rāma is missing Sītā, who is abducted by Rāvaṇa. Hanumān is now on his way to bring about the re-union of Sītā and Rāma. You please come out and provide him rest for a while."

Maināka came up, resplendent in the sunlight like the bright mountain Meru, and was prepared to offer Hanumān the needed respite midway in his flight. But Hanumān mistook the upcoming mountain for a possible obstacle in his path and pressed it in anger against his chest. With that pressure the mountain fell aside in grateful joy. It took human shape, and offering its hospitality, told Hanumān: "Hail Āñjaneya (synonym for 'Hanumān'), you are Rāma's messenger. Rāma is dear to the Sea-god. The sea-god shelters me, and at his request I came up in order that you may pause for a comfortable stop on your long flight. Besides, your father Vāyu was once helpful to me. Let me tell you how he helped me.

"In Kṛta yuga (the earliest age of man) mountain had wings. They were then able to fly hither and thither like Garuḍa, the divine bird, and were frightening the gods and sages. Devendra, the lord of gods, had to cut off the wings of the mountains to save his followers from fright. Your father saw me running away from Devendra's wrath, and kindly flung me into the sea. I could thus escape from Devendra's blast, and I alone have wings, which now empowered me to fly up into midsky and furnish you a halting place. Any guest deserves unqualified respect, but more so you, the knower of Dharma, the devotee of Rāma. So let me pay my debt of gratitude to your father through this little act of kindness to you."

Pleased with Maināka's words, Hanumān replied: "Well, Maināka, thank you. But I promised my mates that I would not pause on my way across the sea. So it won't be right I should tarry here. Anyway, I consider your kind words as actual deeds and take it that I have been given your hospitality. I am glad, you too, like the birds and the animals, are giving me support in my duty to Rāma. In my gratitude, I shake hands with you."

The Gods were pleased at this union. Devendra further assured the mountain that he would spare him. He was elated.

And as Hanumān was progressing along his flight in splendid fashion, the demi-gods were filled with a curious desire to test his strength. To that end they beckoned Surasā, a snake-messenger from the lower world and ordered her: "Surasā, you assume a demoniac form with frightful face and ferocious claws, and fight Hanumān. Let us see if he can master you."

TRIAL OF STRENGTH

Surasā gladly accepted the proposal. Assuming a ferocious form, and roaring frighteningly, she obstructed the passage of Hanumān. With her mouth wide open, she demanded his entry into it, for, she said, the gods sent him for her nourishment.

Upon which, Hanumān told her of his errand on behalf of Rāma: "Surasā, I shall return to you as soon as I bring Rāma and Sītā together. Then you may freely eat me up. This region belongs to the Raghu dynasty. So it behoves you also to do your bit to help Rāma."

But Surasā would not heed him, and further boasted, that because of the boon Brahmā granted her none could go against her wishes. This aroused Hanumān's anger, and he said: "Well, Surasā, open your jaws. I shall now enter your mouth." Surasā did accordingly. Hanumān assumed a gigantic shape spanning several miles. Not to be outdone, Surasā increased her shape double of what he did. As the struggle progressed, Surasā grew five times larger than Hanumān, and, to eat him up, further stretched out her tongue.

Then Hanumān diminished himself to thumb-size and entered Surasā's mouth, and, before the jaws could close up, came out of it and flew up skywards. He told her: "Now then, Surasā, all that you wanted was that I should enter your mouth. You had your wish fulfilled. So let us now part in friendship. Do your best for Rāma."

Surasā was satisfied, and assuming her original shape, replied: "Mighty friend, I am all admiration for your will-power, valour

and virtue, sense of proportion and tact. May your efforts succeed! You are sure to bring together Rāma and Sītā. It is just to test your courage that the gods made **me** challenge you. You really are unconquerable."

Hanumān's joy knew no bounds. He proceeded on his flight with increased speed and determination.

Now it was the turn of the she-demon *Simhikā* to come in the way of Hanumān. Wishing to swallow him up, first she took hold of his shadow. His flying speed was now reduced, and he realized that she must be the "shadow-catcher" his leader *Sugrīva* warned him about. Then he magnified his body into a big shape. As she opened her mouth to suck him in, Hanumān entered it, and began to tear away her larynx. Even before she could close up her jaws he got out and flew back towards the sky. Still keeping up his oversized physical form, he threw down the demon into the sea. The angels and the seraphs who witnessed the fight declared to Hanumān: "Great monkey-god, in the speed of your flight you equal *Garuḍa*, the heavenly mount of Lord *Viṣṇu*. Quelling *Simhikā*, you proved your might. The good deed of *Sītā-Rāma* reunion will materialise through you alone. Your fame will shine **as** long **as** the **sun** and the moon and the stars do. Verily, there is no defeat for people who, like you, **are** blessed with courage, imagination, dedication to duty, integrity of character and devotional spirit."

Hanumān was baffled by this praise. After all, he thought, he **was** **a** **more** **instrument** in this affair. Then he understood that a higher power must have granted him the needed means to achieve his great end. He felt his being filled with the divine might of Rāma. Indeed his individual soul and the universal soul of Rāma were united in spirit and were indivisible, he realized.

Hanumān resumed his flight. He was not far from his destination, *Laṅkā*. He could **see** in the distance the forests and rivers and streams on the other side. Having already been informed by *Sampātī* of *Sītā*'s certain stay in *Laṅkā*, he was overjoyed to find himself **so** near his goal. He knew he could cross the ocean with ease, thanks to Rāma's blessings. Now it was up to him to find out where *Sītā* actually is. Since he might frighten the

Rākṣasas (denizens of Laṅkā) with his gigantic shape, he reassumed his real form—thereby releasing himself from all false sense of identity with the gross body, ■ does one who knows that one's real self is not apart from the Supreme Ātman.

*Tataḥ śarīram samkṣīpya tanmahīdhara sannibham,
Punaḥ prakṛtim āpede vītamoha iva ātmavān.*

Then landing ■■ mount Lamba, which ■■■ in full splendour covered with multi-coloured flowers and fruits on its trees, Hanumān bestirred himself. Scared by that heavy stirring the wild animals there began to ■■■ helter-skelter.

He then went ■■ to Mount Trikūṭa, and took ■ look at the whole city of Laṅkā, and thought it looked more prosperous than Amarāvati, the abode of Devendra, the king of gods.

The gods showered flowers on Hanumān. Truly, nothing is impossible to one whose strength of purpose is coupled with dedication and devotion to duty.

LAṅKĀ

The ramparts of Laṅkā city provide a feast for the eyes.

The whole city is surrounded by ■ golden wall. The moat around the castle of Rāvaṇa is broad and deep, and its waters are clear and filled with lilies and lotuses. At the gates ferocious looking watchmen stand guard in full armour.

On both sides of the wide streets are trees bearing fruits and flowers, and offering cool shade to the weary pedestrian. Here and there are parks and gardens full of rare varieties of trees. The birds play among the boughs, often resting there, and often flying above into the sky from there.

On the park benches the lovers were enjoying themselves freely and boisterously, unaware of the outside world. The celibate Hanumān turned away his head bashfully. The swans and the ■■■ too move about in the lake in loving pairs.

The residential buildings are built of marble, and the interiors are lined with golden and diamond frescoes and sculptures in the

form of birds and flowers. These sky-scraping edifices are adorned by flags flying above the towers, with various emblems like fishes and crocodiles.

Seeing this Laṅkā island, Hanumān thought:

*Caturnāmeva hi gatiṃ vānarāṇām mahātmanām,
Vāliputrasya nīlasya rājñaśca dhīmataḥ.*

Excepting Sugrīva, Aṅgada, Nīla and myself, no other monkey can enter this island. It seems to be a tough job to conquer this city. It isn't easy to subdue all these terrible strong demons. Besides, these people have all the needed means and ends to make themselves invincible.

*Avakāśo na sāntvasya rākṣaṣeṣu abhigamyate,
Na dānasya na bhedasya naiva yuddhasya drśyate*

No kind words cut ice with these fighters. It is impossible to bribe them. Nor can any wiles of statecraft work out in their case. Rāvaṇa's followers are too frightened of him to allow themselves to be divided against him. Even war against Rāvaṇa seems to be a tough proposition. If only I can find out where Sītā Devī is, the next step can easily be thought of. I can trace her only through crafty means. There is no other way than vanquishing the crafty people through craft. If I enter the city during daytime, they might capture me. So I must get in at night. Rāvaṇa is no fool: he would discover me whatever form I assume.

"I must see Sītā when she is all alone. If the spies and messengers go about their business without foresight and without an understanding of the right time and place, their errands will fail. They mustn't follow their own blind counsels but must obey the instructions of their leaders and lords. This crossing of the sea by me should not be in vain. There is no point in getting myself rattled. Confusing myself would only ruin the peace of my mind. And that would lead to several other setbacks. Not because of me should Sītā Devī be put to any kind of trouble. And I mustn't in any manner cause Rāma's work obstruction. Rāvaṇa is threatening not only my father, Vāyu, but also all the lords of the celestial kingdom. So he must be meted out due punishment.

"I must assume a microscopic shape. This is the best means of finding Sītā Devī's whereabouts. Well, Rāvaṇa, the time has come

for the destruction of not only yours but also of all your clan's—you who abducted such a personification of mother-hood as Sītā is. And I have come here the forerunner of the God of Death. You have antagonised the sacred Śrī Rāma, and his arrows are anxious to pierce you to death."

The monkey was about to set in the west. Hanumān reduced himself to the size of a kitten. Now who can recognise the mighty monkey? His features were alight with heavenly glow. His mind fully attuned to the godliness of Rāma, he sought the blessings of that incarnation of God. Soon after sunset he flew up into the sky. The gods showered flowers on him, and as he approached the town of Laṅkā, said: Hanumān, may you succeed in your efforts! You are sure to see Sītā. Having won in your quest you will go back to mount Prasavaṇa and inform Rāma about Sītā. Rāma will come down to Laṅkā, and with the aid of his divine weapons will crush Rāvaṇa and his people. And so your name and fame will flourish till eternity.

Hanumān felt new strength. He reached the gates of Laṅkā. The doors were open. He peered in. Oh, what a splendid sight! He couldn't help reflecting on two contrary aspects of the impending events. One was that such a sight of gods has to be burned down because of Rāvaṇa's folly; the other was that he would soon be in the presence of Sītā and would realize the joy of achieving his aim.

The moon, surrounded by clear-twinkling stars, was shedding her cool light on the world. She looked like a swan roaming in the skylake.

*Lokasya pāpāni vināśayantam
Mahodadhim cā'pi samedhayantam,
Bhūtāni sarvāṇi virājayantam
Dadarśa sītāṁśum athābhiyantam.*

The cries of the demon-denizens of Laṅkā made frightful hearing. Their hoarse voices were resounding in all directions. Even the elephants standing near the town gates were making terrible sounds. The lights were shining bright in both the houses and the streets. The flags were flying, blown by cool winds, on housetops. And the little bells attached to them were making pleasingly tinkling sounds.

Above the terraces of the buildings are pleasure resorts. There flourish golden benches studded with diamonds, emeralds and pearls; their tops are covered with silver. And the towers and the minars were sparkling with gem-studded steps. Peacocks and cranes wander in gay abandon all over the place. At the main door are to be seen swan pairs. In this bright spot the night itself seemed to shed daylight, and everywhere were delight and light mingled with song and dance—an assimilation of natural and human joy.

Hanumān inspected closely the whole town. Though he saw fully-armoured soldiers everywhere, he was still sure that he could easily destroy the whole city. Such far-sightedness and statecraft as can properly judge the might of oneself and of the enemy were his inborn gifts. He thought: "Sugrīva, Aṅgada, Kuśaparva, Rkṣa, Ketumanta and I can surely vanquish this town."

FIRST VICTORY

As he then suddenly reminded himself of the valour of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, Hanumān's heart swelled with pride and joy. In this state of semi-distraction, he was easily discerned by the presiding goddess of Laṅkā, who angrily spoke to him thus: "Who are you? You who should live on fruits in the forest, what business have you in this city? Rāvaṇa's armed forces are keenly standing guard all over the town. So you cannot get in here. Why are you so recklessly facing such danger?"

Hanumān was laughing up his sleeve. If she weren't a woman he would have killed her for her impudence. Just because she is under the care of Rāvaṇa, she forgot herself and spoke to the mighty Hanumān, who isn't a bit afraid of Rāvaṇa himself.

He replied: "Woman, I shall tell you why I came. But first tell me who you are—thus, in fierce form, keeping watch over the gates of Laṅkā? Why are you threatening me? What does it avail you to thwart me?"

The Laṅkā-guardian replied: "O Hanumān, the ruler of this island is the king of kings. He is feared by all the gods of the universe, and there is none in the three worlds who can conquer him. I am in the service of such a mighty person. I am the

protectress of this isle, and unless you subdue me you cannot get in. Now then, tell ■■■ who you are, and be warned you will be duly punished if you lie."

Her words struck Hanumān's heart like pinpricks. Being ■ sagacious individual, he kept his temper in check and replied in humility: "O guardian of Laṅkā, I am enamoured of the beauty of this Laṅkā. This place excels even the heavenly seat of Indra. I am agog to witness the wonderful edifices and the lush parks of this island. Please don't come in my way."

The Laṅkā guardian retorted: "You seem to be quite ■ crafty fellow. You have ■■ right to enter. If you disregard my warning in your fickle-mindedness, you will meet your death at my hands."

Hanumān said: "Well, "guardian angel", let ■■ just take a look at this lovely city built by the heavenly architect Viśvakarma." At this the demon got wild and shrieking fiercely hit Hanumān ■■ his back. In his turn Hanumān gave her a heavy blow with his clenched fist. The blow struck her down. On seeing her unhappy lot, Hanumān took pity on her.

Now the demon, terrified by Hanumān's strength, spoke to him humbly: "O magnanimous hero, I mistook you for ■■ ordinary monkey and offended you. I paid the penalty for my folly. You are a high-born one. It is said that a woman must not be killed by ■■■■. So I seek your forgiveness. Please protect me. You conquered me. In my regard for your might, I wish to tell you all about myself.

"Once upon ■ time Rāvaṇa pestered Nandikeśvara and other gods. Then they cursed that the city of Laṅkā should turn into ashes. Frightened because of this, I ran up to Brahman and prayed for release from this curse. Brahmā assured me, 'Fear not, before long ■ monkey-hero will arrive in Laṅkā and conquer you. The whole Rākṣasa race will be rooted out. You may set your mind at rest.'

"Brahmā's decision cannot be revoked. Sītā Devī is verily the messenger-of Death to Rāvaṇa. He is ■ wise fool. For his sins, not only himself but his whole people, as well, will have to pay with their lives. So you may go and ■■■■ about freely inside this city."

Hanumān was overjoyed. Looking back, he could realize that he crossed the sea without much effort; he could conquer the guardian of the Laṅkā city gates. Now learning about Brahmā's will he was infused with greater confidence. All that remains for him is to know where exactly Sītā is.

*Dvāreṇa sa mahābāhuḥ prākāramabhipuḥ,
Niśi lankām mahāsattvo viveśa kapikuñjaraḥ.*

Statecraft enjoins that none should enter the enemy's home or town through the main gate. Therefore Hanumān jumped over the compound wall and before proceeding into the town rested his left foot on the earth.

*Praviśya nagarīm laṅkām
Kapiṛājahutaṁkaraḥ,
cakre 'tha pādām savyam ca
śatrūṇām tu mūrdhani.*

TOWN ENTRY

Having entered the town, Hanumān began his search for Sītā. He saw various kinds of edifices standing in their magnificence and splendour; colourfully adorned with lovely flowers of all species. He could hear the sweet songs sung by the deliciously drunken ~~people~~ of the town. He could also hear the sound of their steps in dancing to the tunes celebrating their valour and vigour.

Proceeding further, he witnessed the army camps. Wielding ~~all~~ sorts of weapons and ensigns and flags, there were to be found well-armoured and well-equipped soldiers and guards. For all that, he could realize that these people were not invincible.

He also saw, among the civilians, Rākṣasas of different descriptions—*Virūpa*, *Surūpa* and *Bahurūpa*. Some were bald; some wore long plaits; ~~some~~ covered themselves with ox-hide. Some ~~were~~ performing Ābhicārika Homa, to be effective in killing their enemies. Some more were amply bejewelled and well-perfumed, and were unabashedly enjoying themselves in the company of their beloveds in the gardens and parks.

In the centre of the town, upon a high hill, appeared a marvellous palace. It was surrounded by goldenly gleaming ramparts and ■ wide moat. From inside the castle itself were visible millions of soldiers, several golden chariots, airplanes and horses. At the main entrance of the castle jumbos stood guard. Near them were wild animals and fat birds. The cuckoo and the nightingale and the lark were singing, while the peacocks were dancing. From this preciously decorated place emanated sweet smells of sandalwood, musk and the like. Wondering at Rāvaṇa's riches and grandeur, Hanumān got in.

The sky was cloudless. As though sporting with the stars around, the moon spread over the country her cool, clear light. She made the seas swell with high tide, and soothed the populace with her tender beams. On the other hand, the moonlight seemed to be provoking the demons to indulge in more meat-eating, and the lovers in general to forget themselves in unashamed lechery.

At the other end of Laṅkā were to be heard the soft notes of Vīṇā. While the family women were slumbering in peace along with their husbands, the drunken Rākṣasas were going on a spree, slapping one another on the back, swearing and laughing at one another, swaggering and approaching the wanton women with lustful thoughts.

However, there were also to be ~~some~~ good persons and scholars who were passing their time in worthy occupations like literary discussions. In this part of the city the lovers were ~~more~~ dignified. The women were inducing gently their friends with side-glances of love to imbibe wine, and later finding themselves in self-forgetful embraces with their beaux—even as the very sight of their lovers incited them into inseparable union with them.

And yet Hanumān couldn't sight Sītā.

SEARCH

In side the Laṅkā town Hanumān assiduously searched the abodes of Prāhastā, Kumbhakarṇa, Mahāpārśva, Indrajit, Vibhī-ṣaṇa and Jambumāli. Still there was no trace of Sītā.

At last he entered the interior of Rāvaṇa's castle. There were to be found many splendid tower-houses, guarded by well-armed and ferocious-looking Rākṣasa and women. The caparisoned elephants were in rut. The soldiers in golden armour were standing at attention. Inside the harem he saw bejewelled bedsteads, sofas, crockery and diamond-studded wine-glasses. He could hear the sounds of women's anklets, drumbeats and handclapping. At the golden windows various birds were playing and making sweet, chirping sounds. Here and there were strewn conchshells and arrows and the like. All the homes there were constructed in strict obedience to the scientific planning advocated by *Vāstu Śāstra*. (architectural science).

The famous Puṣpaka Vimāna (aeroplane) was housed in a place ornamentally decorated with diamonds, pearls, amethysts and emeralds and was beautifully adorned with figures of several birds in silver, and of many horses, snakes and elephants in various metals. The elephants were redolent of those waiting upon goddess Lakṣmī-even as they seemed to have just emerged from bathing in lotus-filled lakes. And the flowers all around were spreading their sweet fragrance.

But even here Hanumān couldn't find Sītā. Worried, he pursued his search with further determination.

He went straight to the aeroplane itself. This Puṣpaka Vimāna built by the divine architect Viśvakarma, and it has the power of leading the occupant to his destination by following his mere wish. None check its progress once it starts its destined journey. Nor here was Sītā.

So he proceeded directly to Rāvaṇa's pleasure resort. At the main portal stood pillars embossed with wolves and crocodiles, carved in gold and silver. The windows were broad and made of gold and paned with stained glass, allowing free ventilation. Here and there not only were the benches and chairs studded with gold, but even the floors were laid with priceless gems. The whole harem was covered with the fragrance of musk and other supreme perfumes. On one side of it chanting Sārasa birds. On the other, candles, lighted as in prayer, were burning on golden

lampstands. Amidst all these were to be seen inviting cups of wine fitted with diamonds, and silver plates of sweetmeats.

As those glowing lights of the palace shone on Rāvaṇa's priceless jewellery, the whole edifice glowed like a single mighty flame.

On the soft quilts and plush beds were multi-ornamented damsels lying down in a state of stupor born of imbibing lush intoxicants. The bees were mistaking their lotus-like faces to be the very lotuses and clustering upon them. In fact, from their visages emanated lotus perfume. The garlands they wore were entangled with their jewels. The sacred crimson dot on their foreheads was partly erased. Their pearl necklaces were snapped in love-play and the pearls were scattered about. Their inhalation and exhalation tossed up and down their breast-covering garment and the fringes were dancing on their faces. They all resembled a creeper trodden by a wild elephant.

Some of those inebriated women were resting their heads on makeshift pillows made of their own clothes. A few of them were unwed; a few were born of noble stock—but all of them looked like being well-versed in the art of love-making. And yet nowhere was Sītā in sight.

In his golden bed strewn with Aśoka flowers, Rāvaṇa was asleep. On his body were visible traces and marks suggestive of his fights with the heavenly elephant Airāvata, with the king of gods Indra, and with Lord Viṣṇu. On his fingers were glittering diamond-studded gold rings. His breath gave out fragrance of choice perfumes, besides the smell of wine and rich food. His bright, bejewelled crown was lying by his side. His earrings gave a peculiar grace to his face. His chest was broad and strong. The saffron-coloured silken garment he wore was in disarray; also was his white shoulder-cloth. The actual process of his breathing was like the hissing of poisonous snakes. The women sleeping around him appeared in varied postures—one had her Viṇā in her arms; another had a guitar under her shoulders; yet another had a flute in her hands. Rāvaṇa resembled the moon amid stars, sleeping in their midst.

On ■ bed adjacent to Rāvaṇa's, slept his queen Maṇḍoḍari. She was of such resplendent beauty that for a minute Hanumān mistook her for Sītā. But that was only a momentary illusion. On second thoughts he told himself: "Sītā Devī is as pure as the driven snow, the personification of chastity. It was quite ■ long time since she was away from Rāma. In this separation she wouldn't care much for food and sleep; she wouldn't touch drink; she wouldn't look at any ■■■ other than Rāma with desire. So this well-bedecked woman cannot be Sītā."

Then he proceeded to Rāvaṇa's feasting room. There were on the table all kinds of meat and sweetmeats, all kinds of food and drink served on silver and gold trays. Even here were some women, sleeping in a self-forgetful, semi-nude state. But no Sītā anywhere.

Seeing those women in undress, Hanumān wondered whether he was guilty of a misdemeanour. He thought: "Assured of their privacy, these are lying down *in puris naturalibus*. How could they foresee ■ would be coming here? Looking at these provocative figures, my mind doesn't feel uneasy.

*Mano hi hetuḥ sarveṣāṃ
Indriyāṇāṃ pravartane,
Śubhā'śubhāsu avastheṣu
Tat ca ■■■ suvyavasthitam.*

"Mind is the guide to all senses. My mind is strong and unimpulsive. Anyway, it is right to look for things in their natural company. Sītā Devī could be found only where there are fellow-humans, not among Rākshasa, Gāndharva and Nāga women. These women are slaves to their senses. Whereas, Sītā is an epitome of self-control. So, would she ever stay amidst such people? These females ■■■ not even fit to touch the dust of Sītā's feet."

PROS & CONS

However much he searched the whole of Rāvaṇa's palace, Hanumān could not find ■ trace of Sītā. Then he fell to thinking thus:

"What ■ surprise is this! With all my relentless quest, Sītā could not be found. Sampāti did tell me she was alive; he wouldn't ever lie. Besides he is anxious to learn about the end of Rāvaṇa, the killer of his brother Jaṭāyu. Sītā must be alive. These palatial buildings are not likely to be her places of confinement, but peaceful gardens.

"This Rāvaṇa is not one to fight shy of taking the extreme step to gain his ends. Could it be that he, after all, put ■■ end to Sītā because she would rather die than sacrifice her honour? Or could it be that she herself took her life, frightened by the sight of these terrible Rākṣasa women? Did she really think that suicide alone was her last resort, in her fears about the uncertainty of reunion with Rāma?

*Anirvedo hi satatam sarvārtheṣu pravartakah,
Karoti saphalam jantoḥ karma yat tat karoti saḥ.*

"Enthusiasm is the source of all good deeds. Everything is obtained through exuberance. The wise men insist on enthusiastic effort in all human endeavours. So I shall continue my search with renewed vigour."

Hanumān is Rāma's servant. In order to fulfil his master's errands, he must preserve his self-confidence and will-power. And so he again cogitated thus:

"Sītā is an offspring of immaculate conception. Would she ever yield to such a devil as Rāvaṇa? Supposing she would, she would be unworthy of her sacred birth. That would never happen.

"Or is it possible that Rāvaṇa confined her in an underground prison? What does it avail him to do so?

"Now, even if it should, by force of circumstances, be possible that Sītā did surrender to Rāvaṇa's wishes, or that she submerged herself in the depths of the sea, such ■■■■ must not be conveyed to Rāma. If I would relay such ■ message to him I would lose my Lord. On the other hand, if I suppress the truth, I would be disloyal to my master. ■■■■ to be placed between the devil and the deep sea. If I can't find Sītā, I will lead the rest of my life here like ■ hermit, or I shall drown myself in the ocean, or I shall place

a funeral pyre on the beach and enter it, or, failing in all these, I will fast unto death.

"I thought this first night of the search would be fruitful. With her cool light the moon was of immense help to me. Using all my energy and intellect, I ransacked the whole of Lañkā. And yet I could not see Sītā.

"No, I mustn't leave this city without succeeding in my quest. I shall do penance, fixing my mind on Rāma. If alive, good will come to me sooner or later. Joy and sorrow, good and evil, are like day and night that follow each other. So I shouldn't give up my life till I achieve Rāma's purpose. I shall know no peace of mind till I bring Rāma and Sītā together.

"If I do not find Sītā, I shall not leave Rāvaṇa in peace. I shall take him to the sacrificial rock and cut his neck in a ritual and offer it to Lord Śrī Rāma. Then neither Rāma nor Lakṣmaṇa nor Sugrīva would doubt my *bona fides*. Then no disgrace would be attached to my name. Yes, nothing undesirable should happen either to Rāma's race or to mine, because of me."

ĀSOKA GARDEN

Hanumān glanced all around him. His mind was entirely bent on the search for Sītā. All of a sudden his glance fell on the nearby Āsoka garden. Somehow the sight created hope in him. He had a prescience that Sītā might be dwelling there. A prayer came to his lips:

"O merciful Almighty, I bow to thee. Unless willed by thee, not even a blade of grass does move. Therefore thou must aid me in my quest. Rāvaṇa is the evil one who separated Rāma and Sītā. With thy blessings, I shall destroy him and his people. I shall hand over Sītā to Rāma.

*Namo 'stu rāmāya salakṣmaṇāya
Dēvyai ca tasyai janakātmajāyai,
Namo 'stu rudrendra yamānilebhyo
Namo 'stu candrārkaṃrudgaṇebhyah."*

Having thus prayed to the various manifestations of godhead in Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Sītā, Rudra, Indra, Yama, Vāyu, Sūrya, Candra and the hordes of Marut, and tacitly obtained their blessings, Hanumān fell into a deep reverie. Instantaneously, Sītā Devī seemed to present herself before his eyes. He forgot himself in joy at the sight. Sītā appeared to him with dishevelled hair, in worn out garments, and with a tearful face. Except for the holy *taḷi* (mangalasūtra) around her neck there were no ornaments on her.

Hanumān was moved to tears. He cried aloud: "O mother Sītā, you are alive, aren't you? Oh why such sorry plight for you, the holiest of the holy? I ransacked the whole of Laṅkā for you. Yet I couldn't find you. Helplessly I am weeping. Rāma is keeping on living, merely with the hope of rejoining you. My master Sugrīva made friends with him. Our whole race of Vānaras has taken the vow to do everything in its power to bring you two together. Henceforth you need not fear Rāvaṇa. I have been granted the power by Rāma—not only to destroy Rāvaṇa but also his entire race. O Sītā Devī, you are my spiritual mother and Rāma is my spiritual father. As long as I breathe, Rāvaṇa dare not touch you."

He felt he was vouchsafed a reply by Sītā Devī. Yet when he opened his eyes he could not see her before him. Again great sorrow over-whelmed him. He sobbed like a child who lost its mother.

After a while, Hanumān pulled himself together. In his heart of hearts he knew Sītā was alive. He felt that the time for the success of his errand was fast approaching. Else, how could have Sītā appeared before his (mental) eye? Whoever prays to God in selfless surrender is ever protected by Him. Now Hanumān's whole body was thrilled with renewed joy and confidence. Tears of happiness fell from his eyes. And then Rāma, too, appeared before his mind's eye and signalled him to go forward to Aśoka garden. Hanumān was now certain Sītā would be there and he was much elated with this feeling of certainty. In a trice he jumped over Rāvaṇa's palace precincts on to Aśoka garden.

Arriving there he looked around on all four sides. The garden, mainly filled with Aśoka trees has also several other kinds

of trees yielding rich fruits and lovely flowers. Blithe cuckoos were cooing at their sweetest; roaming bees were drinking of the honey in the blossoms; proud peacocks were dancing with full-spread plumage. As he was jumping from one tree to another, the flowers that fell on him looked like garlands. Was he the personification of the spring deity (Vasanta Rāja)? As though deputised by the king of Malaya mountain who was pleased with Hanumān's strength of purpose, fresh, cool breezes were blowing, and along with them was carried the lush fragrance of the flora. Nearby was tableland meant for sport. It has a few pleasant parks too, housing some cosy edifices which were gleaming in golden glow and which provide rest for the sport lovers. Hanumān wondered if it was possible that Rāvaṇa could have hidden Sītā in one of those buildings, and to ascertain he sprang on to the śimsūpa tree adjacent to it.

Glancing around he thought: "Mother Sītā is so fond of parks and gardens. Such are the right places for her to help her forget her sorrows, where she can offer her morning and evening prayers. So I shall wait for her here." Accordingly, he rested himself there.

Where he sat the flowers blossomed all through the year, regardless of the changes in the seasons. So too grew the fruits. Verily Aśoka garden excelled even Indra's *Nandana* and Kubera's *Caitraratha* pleasure-grounds.

SIGHTING SĪTĀ

Near that Śimsūpa tree stood a thousand-pillared stone edifice. Inside it is to be seen a forlorn woman. Clad in a dirty garment, emaciated with continuous fasting, and sighing and crying in distress, she looked like a lake without lotuses. Her hair was dishevelled.

*Smṛtim iva sandigdham buddhim nipatitām iva
Vihatām iva ca śraddhām asampratihatam iva,
So'pasargam yathāsiddhim buddhim sakaluṣām iva
abhūtena apavādena kīrtim nipatitām iva.*

Her appearance was suggestive of dubious law, of lost fortune, of faithless devotion, of broken hope, of defeated

attempt, of muddled brain, of lost fame, of a frightened deer, of ■ clouded moon, of forgotten education and of misleading speech

A bundle was tied to a bough. The cloth binding it was the one used to gather the ornaments she shed on Mount R̥ṣyamūka. Knowing her to be Sītā, Hanumān was struck with sorrow and pity.

However, his quest has come to a successful end. His wishes were fulfilled. His life was sanctified. Then two divergent views crossed his mind. One was of joy—that he could achieve Rāma's errand. The other was: could she manage to be alive till she rejoined Rāma and would she accept him as Rāma's messenger?

Again he thought: "Ah, this lady is the daughter of the illustrious sage-king Janaka. She resembles the great Rāma in chaste appearance and honest mien. Possibly because of her faith in the valour of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, she looks like the deep, serene Gaṅgā during the rainy season. Oh, how amazing is the spirit of this lady's patience and perseverance, her virtue and her devotion to her spouse! Entirely enwrapped in her love for Rāma, she ventured to follow him into wild woods. And as ill-luck would have it, she fell into the hands of the Rākṣasas. Still, she keeps herself alive in her firm hope of rejoining Rāma. Formerly, taking care of this lady's welfare was the responsibility of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Now it has unfortunately devolved upon these Rākṣasa women.

"Sītā Devī is as pale as the lotus covered with snow. She is crying like the she-Cakravāka deserted by her mate. Oh, how heartless is Cupid! In this lovely Aśoka garden filled with beautiful flowers, and in this moonlit night full of sweet smells and cool breezes, he is tormenting this virtuous woman separated from her wedded husband. One would have thought that only a Rākṣasa would torture those who are already weighed down by sorrow. But now even Manmatha (Cupid) seems to belong to their tribe. If raw gold is put through the furnace it would come out in its true splendour. That such a noble, chaste lady should go through all this, must be the decree of Fate.

"Anyway, the dark nights in her life are now gone; the bright moonlight nights will soon come. Like the sun uncovered by

clouds she will henceforth shine in her native glory. The glory of Rāma and Sītā will live for ever.

“Well now, here come the Rākṣasa women. How ferocious they look like dark clouds! Armed with terrifying weapons, drinking blood and wine, eating meat, and even smearing their bodies with all these victuals, they really ■ ■ frightful sight.”

Hanumān ■ deeply touched. What would become of Sītā? Like a fallen angel, like an elephant felled by ■ lion, she was woebegone. Her sorry state moved him very much. Even the possession of the kingdoms of the whole universe cannot bear comparison with the might of the chastity of Sītā Devī. That must be the reason why Rāma craves for her, so much like a thirsty man seeking drink. Sītā must be restored to Rāma as one would restore a lost kingdom to the king. The golden Sītā would be the brighter, coming out of Rāvaṇa’s furnace-prison. This present plight of her is merely like darkness before dawn. Surely, this darkness is the mirror of Laṅkā’s sad end and of Rāvaṇa’s and his breed’s fall.

At this juncture, sleep overtook Hanumān. He dozed off for a little while. In that semi-aware state ■ vision of Lord Viṣṇu, reclining on the Milk Sea in happy conversation with goddess Lakṣmī, came before him. On opening his eyes in joy he saw none.

In the early hours of dawn the matins were heard. So also was the Vedic chanting of the Brahma Rākṣasas. All this sounded strange to Hanumān.

Before that, during the night, Rāvaṇa had a dream in which he ■ a well-bedecked Sītā. Her beauty and grace aroused his prurience. Just when he was stretching his arms, as though to embrace her, Sītā’s vision was gone. As he desperately wailed “Sītā, Sītā” and opened his eyes, she ■ not to be seen. Unable any longer to repress his desire, he got out of bed, made himself up in all his glory, and proceeded to the Aśoka garden.

He was followed by ■ hundred Rākṣasa women. Some of them ■ carrying golden torches, ■ decorous fans. A few ■ were bringing water in vessels of silver and gold, and liquor in diamond bowls. Like a Queen Swan ■ preceded Rāvaṇa, holding a cream-white Umbrella. The rest of them, with eyes

reddened because of too much boozing, resembled lightnings amid blue clouds. Hanumān could hear the sound of their anklets. He could presently catch a glimpse of Rāvaṇa, wild-looking in his lustful gait and provocative apparel. Fearing harm to Sītā from Rāvaṇa, Hanumān hid himself behind the leaves.

Like a plantain sapling in cyclonic winds, Sītā trembled at the sight of Rāvaṇa. Tears of great sadness fell from her eyes. And yet, she remained in deep concentration, her mind dwelling purely on Rāma. Like a snake who wounds itself through the powers of a charm, Sītā coiled herself into an impregnable pose. In that position she was no match for the loveliness of Aśoka garden. She seemed to Rāvaṇa like a dried-up river, ■■ extinguished wick and a stagnant lily-lake. He saw her as one immersed in ■ vow of penance, unmindful of the outside world.

Rāvaṇa is a fool. Like a man who cannot see even when he has eyes, ■ death approaches him; Rāvaṇa could not recognise the chastity and virtue of Sītā, the devoted beloved of Rāma.

WILE WORDS

Lust has blinded Rāvaṇa. He tried to convince Sītā with sugary words: “Sītā, why are you afraid of me? Why do you so fold yourself up? Except myself, there is no other male around here. I love you with all my heart. I ■■ at your service. Why should you fight shy of approaching me? You know it is permissible for us Rākṣasas to seduce others’ wives even against their will. Still, I am not going to exercise that right of ours in your case. I shall come to you, only if you allow me to do so with reciprocal love.

“I can’t stand the sight of your suffering thus in this island of plenty. Here there is nothing you want but can get it. Make yourself up nicely. Oh, what ■ simpleton you are! Do you think the waters flowing downhill would ever come up? Similarly, once your youth is gone, it will never return. What use is there in repenting after wasting these precious moments of youth?

“Dear Sītā, looking at your grace and beauty, wouldn’t even your creator Brahmā fall in love with you? Is it strange that I should desire you? Come, be mine. All that is mine and myself will

be yours. I am prepared to cede this kingdom of Laṅkā to you. Why, if you would be mine, I shall even conquer this whole earth and give it away to your father, King Janaka. For, there is none in all the worlds who can vanquish me.

“Please take pity on me, How I long to see you well-decorated, your natural splendour further brightened by precious jewels! Do get ready and make me happy.

“Silly one, must you pine for that helpless Rāma, a man who lost his kingdom and is banished to the wild jungles? Poor fellow, lamenting for you, he must have long ago lost his life. Even if he were alive, he couldn’t ever manage to get here. Like the moon hidden behind dark clouds, you wouldn’t be visible to Rāma if you were in my arms.

“I tell you again and again that your ivory teeth, your sparkling eyes, your lovely features, madden me and make me your slave. Just as goddess Lakṣmī is served by the Apsara maidens, the women in my harem will wait on you. Your husband is no match for me in any respect—valour or wealth, physical attraction or spiritual meditation. I ask you again, why weep for him? Sītā, please, here! Sip a bit of this sweet wine. Come and enjoy yourself in my company. Perhaps to make you joyous and joyful is this garden-goddess excelling itself impatiently.”

REPLY

Sītā was so disgusted with Rāvaṇa’s words that she wouldn’t even face him while replying him. So she placed a straw between him and her, and tearfully told him:

“You wicked man, stick to your own wives. Leave me alone. There’s no use praying for my favours. I am a chaste woman. I cannot bring shame on my people on account of my wrong behaviour.

“Be wise, and follow the code of justice and fair play. What your wives mean to you, so do others’ wives to their husbands. Just as you guard your wives so too do others. Those who covet others’

wives are not only sure to be defamed but will also cause themselves ruin.

"Fool, are there no wise men in this city of yours, who advise you and guide you along the path of righteousness? If you have such advisers, why don't you heed their counsel? This beautiful Laṅkā is going to be destroyed because of you. All these innocent denizens who are being put to trouble by your sins are looking forward to the day of your death.

"O sinner, you can't lead me astray by promising me your rewards of pomp and prosperity. Just as sunlight and moonlight cannot exist without the sun and the moon respectively, so also I cannot subsist without Rāma. Is it right that you should try to separate us? Please send me back to my husband. Then good will happen to you. He is a generous man, the personification of truth and justice. He will forgive even his enemies who seek his forgiveness. No harm can befall you if you make friends with that large-hearted soul.

"Else, death alone will be your refuge. Indra's thunderbolt might spare you; Yama, the Lord of Death, might be afraid of you; but the fire-breathing, death-bringing arrows of Rāma will root out you and your race.

"Coward, where were you when my husband killed your people in Janasthāna? You came to abduct me in my cottage, in the absence of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Doesn't it show what a dastard you are? If you were such an invincible person, why didn't you face them bravely? Yes, if you really did so, you would have there and then gained the unending sleep of death. Be gone Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa will be here soon. Rāma's pointed arrows will tear your heart out. Then you wouldn't have time to repent."

Sītā's admonition pricked Rāvaṇa's heart like thorns. He retorted: "Sītā, I know women not only reject but also insult the man who seeks their favours of his own accord. I also know it is my fault that I love you. Sexual desire is a human thing. It affects even sages. Whether they be men or women, who are loved, the opposite sex that loves them feels for them a certain amount of pity and sympathy. I have similar affection for you. Manmatha

(Cupid) is subduing my natural anger. Else, for your insulting language I would have not only assaulted you but also killed you mercilessly. You simpleton, bid farewell to your detachment. I give you two months to come round. If before then you do not come to my bed, the next day I will tear you to pieces and partake of your flesh and blood for my breakfast."

Then Sītā replied: "Rāvaṇa, no well-wisher of yours is to be found in this city. You talked to me in the most unforgivable style. You will surely pay for this. An evil-doer like you will never attain salvation. You are a rabbit to the lion of my husband. Aren't you ashamed of yourself for abducting me? For this crime your eyes will come out of their sockets, your tongue will be cut into minute shreds.

*Asandēśāt tu rāmasya tapasaścā' nupālanāt,
Na tvām kurmi Daśagrīva bhasma bhasmārhatējasā.*

"Although I could curse you to become ashes right now, I refrain from doing so, in accordance with the code of chastity, which enjoins on me my husband's prior permission."

Rāvaṇa was of the colour of blue clouds. His eyes were burning like flames. A black cobra is circling his waist. Wearing blood-smeared clothes, besmeared with sandal-paste and bedecked with garlands and golden earrings, he was shining with a peculiar brightness.

His face crimson with anger, he shouted: "Sītā, your husband is a pauper. Whereas I am a prosperous personage. I too can turn you into ashes with my powers. But my tender passion for you is withholding me."

Having spoken thus, he turned round to the Rākṣasa women surrounding Sītā and ordered them: "My good women, you try all your crafts of persuasion and subversion, and see that Sītā will change her mind and become mine."

Sītā Devī didn't move a bit.

One of Rāvaṇa's wives, Dhānyamālīnī, beseeched him: "Lord, this lady, Sītā, is overwhelmed with sorrow, and woefully

weak with suffering. How can you enjoy her in this state? What fun is there in sporting with a reluctant woman?" Rāvaṇa smilingly shrugged his shoulders. He turned back towards his palace with disappointment and distress. Instead of diminishing his craving for Sītā, all that happened only redoubled it.

As commanded by Rāvaṇa, the Rākṣasa women gathered round Sītā and thus began advising her: "Marīci, Atri, Angirasa, Pulastya, Pulaha and Kratu—these are the six Prajāpatis (lords of creation.) Of these, the fourth one Pulastya is Brahmā's favourite son. His son is Viśravasa, ■ person of great renown and power. And his son is our King Rāvaṇa!

"This Rāvaṇa is no less a man than the conqueror of the three worlds. He is the king of kings. He is now glorying in all the riches and the privileges which only ■ man of his calibre can enjoy in this world. One might say that all the forces of the universe—not just the sun and the moon, but the presiding deities of the entire heavenly kingdom ■ well—fear Rāvaṇa's prowess, and obey his behests.

"His palatial abode is ever resplendent with the multi-splendoured light and brightness of precious stones that adorn its every nook and corner. Now, Sītā, you who should at this hour be sleeping on Rāvaṇa's silken mattresses of eiderdown, why do you put yourself to the discomfort of lying down on this ground?

"Of course, you are an ordinary human being, and therefore you love ■■ ordinary human being. But are you wise in sacrificing all these promised luxuries and comforts for the sake of ■■■■ who lost his kingdom, who roams about the wild forests like ■ semi-naked mendicant? Oh, what a fool you are! Surely, you should know that your husband cannot reach this island. This mighty sea that surrounds us is impassable.

"Listen. Still you have time to reconsider your folly. Rāvaṇa is prepared to leave even his queen Mandodarī in order to make you his. Not all women can get such ■ splendid opportunity. You alone got it, thanks to your good deeds in a former birth. So be your age, become Rāvaṇa's consort, and enjoy all the pleasures of his palace and kingdom."

DECISION

The words of the Rākṣasa women struck Sītā's heart like arrows. She replied them tearfully, "Please don't hurt me with your cruel words. Already my heart is half-broken. Is it fair on your part to torture an already defeated creature? You must know that I am a human being. How can I ever think of accepting a Rākṣasa man? My husband may be a mere human being. He might be one who had lost his kingdom. But he is the personification of all virtues. He is the embodiment of truth and justice. He is the epitome of loving-kindness. He comes from the much renowned Ikṣvāku dynasty. He is a perfectly sanctified figure. I am the beloved daughter of the great sage-king, Janaka. We were married before the divine fire-witness, Agni. Before sending me to my father-in-law's place, my father enjoined on me that I should follow my husband's instructions, however rigorous they may be. The heirs of Ikṣvāku lineage are not known to break their promises. Similarly chaste women like me ever tread in the footsteps of their husbands. Just as Suvarcalā followed Sūrya, Śacī obeyed Indra, Arundhatī served Vasiṣṭha, Rohiṇī loved Candra, Lopāmudrā attended on Agastya, Sukanyā ministered to Cyavana, Sāvitrī accompanied Satyavān, Śrīmātī lived through thick and thin with Kapila, Madayantī shared Saudāsa's ill as well as good luck, Keśinī threw in her lot with Sagara and Damayantī went through life's struggles with Nala, so also will I continue to stand by Rāma. Those great forbears of mine were not driven by the love of kingdom and riches. Their concern was only for deathless chastity and flawless fame. I could have stayed on in Ayodhyā, but believing my God is my husband, I followed him into the rugged jungles and forests. If you take pity on me, you must leave me alone or if you want, you can cut me into pieces and eat me. You may quench your thirst by drinking my blood. But just note this much: my husband will come here sooner or later, and he will kill Rāvaṇa and take me back."

Upon which the Rākṣasa women turned ferocious and began to threaten her with dangerous weapons. Sītā was helplessly mute. She could only pray to her Lord Rāma that he save her and her reputation.

Then the Rākṣasa women told Sītā "You idiot, we do sympathise with your chastity. But you must be aware that Rāvaṇa

is ■ skilful man, a man capable of much valour and sacrifice, ■ man of pleasing habits and looks. So join him and enjoy yourself. After all, youth is transitory. Hurry up and make the most of what you still have."

Supporting herself with the stem of the Aśoka tree, ~~Sitā~~ started sobbing and broke out into this lament, "Oh Rāma. Oh Lakṣmaṇa, Oh Kausalyā, Oh Janaka, can't you hear my heart-breaking wails? No one dies until the destined day. I ■■■ still alive, I can never endure even one second away from my husband. Why is it that the God of Death does not take me away from all this pain and anguish? Like the flood-bank cut into by the force of the floods, my heart is being torn into pieces by continuous grief.

The Gods in Heaven and the sages on earth are looking on my Lord Rāma, who is the incarnation of Viṣṇu. There must be something of which, unknown to myself, I ■■■ guilty. If it were not for some ill-deed of my own in a former birth, why should I have to suffer these tortures? I have no further wish to live. These Rākṣasa ~~women~~ would not let me commit suicide. Oh God, my husband is not here. My father is away from me. So you alone are my refuge. You who ~~are~~ the saviour of all creatures, would you find me a burden? If so, give ■■■ leave to die. What does a *pativrātā* (a virtuous woman) wish for other than dying as a *Sumangalī* (while her husband is alive)?

"Into what dangerous predicament has my husband fallen! Else wouldn't he have already come here to rescue me? Rāvaṇa had forcibly enticed me away and put ■■■ in the clutches of these Rākṣasa women. I am not able to withstand the abuses and onslaughts of these witches. I can no longer endure this grief. Oh, is my heart made of stone? Why does it not break? Why don't I die?" Wailing thus, Sītā fell into ■ swoon.

After ■ while, she came to, and thus appealed to the Rākṣasa women. I ■■■ losing my hope of rejoining my husband. Is it not for this clayish body of flesh and blood that Rāvaṇa has been torturing me? Please cut this wretched body into pieces and offer them as sacrifice to Lord Agni (God of Fire). Rāvaṇa must be under the impression that because this island is surrounded by a mighty ocean, the outsiders cannot get in here. Rāma's arrows will ~~not~~

spare even a drop of this great sea. No power on earth can withstand the onslaught of his divine weapons. Eventhough the old Jaṭāyu fought with Rāvaṇa to save me, perhaps he later on died. But still, if any good man had informed Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa of my fate, would not this great city be destroyed by those great warriors? Your end is in sight. Your fate is sealed. As soon as my husband kills Rāvaṇa, this kingdom will become destitute. Surely, all these Rākṣasas here will become a prey to Rāma's arrows. Thus their wives will naturally become widows. Their cries will reach the skies. But none will heed your lament."

Hearing Sītā's words, the Rākṣasa women became very angry. Some of them left to carry this news to Rāvaṇa. Some others threatened that they would eat her. At this juncture, Trijaṭā, the virtuous Rākṣasa woman, woke up from her deep sleep.

DREAM

Seeing the Rākṣasa women unjustly bluffing Sītā, Trijaṭā spoke to them in this manner. "You foolish women, Sītā is a great and chaste lady. You must not vex her. Just now, I had a bad dream. A thousand swans were carrying a Śibikā (palanquin) made of elephant tusks. In that, the white-clad Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were seated. Sītā also was wearing white garments and was seated on the white mountain, in the middle of the mighty ocean. A well-caparisoned elephant of high stature was approaching Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Seated on that, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa came to Sītā Devī. Seeing them, Sītā saluted them. From her eyes, tears of joy were dropping. Rāma made a sign to Sītā, asking her to come upto him. Sītā did accordingly. The joy of Sītā, Rāma, and Lakṣmaṇa knew no bounds. Sītā Devī touched, for fun, the Sun and the Moon in the Sky and released them after a second. That mighty tusker carrying Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa along the heavenly path above the sea, at last arrived into Laṅkā City. Leaving the elephant, they entered the *Pushpaka Vimāna* (a great aeroplane) and proceeded northwards.

"At that hour, Rāvaṇa's body was saturated with oil. Wearing red clothes and a garland of wild flowers, Rāvaṇa fell down from

the aeroplane in an inebriated state. Then a woman clad in black, dragged him along the ground, and his body was smeared with more blood. Rāvaṇa travelling towards south on back of ■ mule fell into a slushy pond on the way. Yet another woman wearing red robes put on ■ noose around his neck and dragged him further south. Kumbhakarna on ■ camel and Indrajit on a crocodile were also going southwards.

"Then I saw Vibhiṣaṇa astride ■ mighty tusker upon which there was ■ white umbrella covering him, and he himself was wearing white clothes and was besmeared with white sandal paste. The whole atmosphere was reverberating with the sound of conch-shells and drums. Various minstrels and dancers were playing their parts. Afterwards an elephant, wonderfully decorated, came on the scene. Vibhiṣaṇa and his four ministers got into the plane and were flying above the Laṅkā city with great mirth and joy. I could see the walls surrounding the city and the towers above the edifices broken down. I could also see many elephants and horses, along with the chariots, drowning in the middle of the ocean. A powerful monkey arrived into the city and set it on fire. Around those heaps of ashes the Rākṣasa women were wailing and running hither and thither.

"Sītā is the most virtuous of the world's virtuous women. It is up to you to recognise her goodness, and respect her as she should be respected. You have no other way out of your predicament. All that you can hope for is to salute her and serve her so that she may take pity on you. She alone can save you. I ■■■ sure my dream will become true. I think this dream was only to serve as a foreboding of the inevitable end of our kingdom. This is all for Sītā's good; Sītā Devī's left eye, left shoulder, and left thigh are trembling as a sign of the forthcoming good news. There on that tree-top, a Piṅgali bird is singing as though to welcome Rāma. Surely Rāma will come here and kill Rāvaṇa."

Like a girl left alone in ■ wilderness, Sītā Devī again began to lament thus: "I am unable to bear the inequities which these women ■■■ inflicting on me. My good days were long ago gone. My heart is bowed down with sorrow. And yet I do not know why my mind is still unperturbed. I know Rāvaṇa's desire will never be fulfilled. If, by the time Rāvaṇa set the deadline, my husband does

not come here, the demon will definitely cut me into pieces. Oh Rāma, what a miserable wretch I am! What terrible pain and suffering we all had to go through because of my folly! Disregarding the wise counsels of Lakṣmaṇa, I made a fool of myself. I even abused him mercilessly. Let no evil come upon Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa because of that wily deer! Oh Rāma, like a full Moon, you please the whole animate world. You who have such a beneficent influence on all mankind, must you thus neglect me? Don't you know that I am in the clutches of Rāvaṇa? Are my patience and chastity of no avail? Gradually my hope of rejoining you is dying down. You will fulfil your father's command and then return alone to Ayodhyā. There the people will welcome you with open arms and obey you implicitly. Please forget this forlorn creature and enjoy your kingly pleasures. Never weep for me. I have no greater wish than to see you happy. My love for you has brought me to this state. Also, it is my love for you that kept me alive. I would gladly commit suicide. But I cannot find any good person who would give me poison or a deadly weapon."

Suffering from unbearable anguish, Sītā began forming a plan of her long plaits in order to take her life. Just then, Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata, Śatrughna, her three mothers-in-law, the whole populace of Ayodhyā, king Janaka and her play-mates presented themselves before her mental eye and began questioning her whether what she was thinking of doing was right. Unable to answer them adequately, she shed silent tears. How can she forsake her beloved kith and kin?

INTROSPECTION

Sītā began to think "As my Lord hears the news of my death, he will give up his life. Lakṣmaṇa's love for his brother is matchless. He is such a self-sacrificing individual that he thought that the welfare of Rāma and Sītā was his own and forsook his own well-being for their sake. If his brother Rāma dies, will Lakṣmaṇa survive him? And if Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa die, it is unthinkable that Bharata would continue to live on this planet. His self-sacrificing spirit also is unrivalled. He is ruling the kingdom of Ayodhyā, placing the sandals of Rāma, as the latter's representative. He always proclaims himself to be Rāma's servant. Ah, how

great is his fidelity! Such a man is therefore sure to take his life after Rāma is no longer alive. Similarly, Śatrughna also will commit suicide, on hearing the news of the demise of his elder brothers. And if all the four sons die, would their three mothers continue to live? Oh, is the whole Ikṣvāku clan going to perish? Must the people of Ayodhyā suffer the fate of kinglessness?" Then Sītā partially lost her consciousness.

In her state of semi-consciousness, she could visualise her father shedding tears in a helpless state. She then went up to him and he pressed her to his heart. Neither of them could utter a word. Her father asked her whether it was right on her part to leave him for ever. She didn't know what to say in reply.

(If she kills herself, surely her father also would kill himself.) And then, her playmates surrounded her and pityingly questioned her whether she should in all fairness leave them bereaved.

Then Sītā regained consciousness. She could not see any one around her. She knew it was all a dream and began to cry all the more.

Man suffers under the delusion of Māyā (superimposition of falsehood over the truth of God). It is not easy to tear off this veil of Māyā. Only the realized souls can cut through the darkness of Māyā, and understand the mundane world and their physical form as the transient expressions of an eternal Self, and thereby become one with the Universal Spirit.

GOOD OMENS

Both the left eye and the left shoulder of Sītā began to tremble as a sign of the coming success. Her worn-out *sari* began to move out. Formerly such omens were not in vain. Therefore the seed of hope sown in her heart. Her grief, confusion and anguish slowly started dying. Her eyes began to sparkle. A bright ray of hope shone on her face.

Hanumān saw Rāvaṇa and his followers threatening Sītā. He thought: "How benevolent is God! My efforts have borne fruits. I am the luckiest of the monkey race. I see with my bodily eyes this

jewel of a chaste woman, Sītā Devī. I have already conned the might of Rāvaṇa's army and found out it is relatively powerless. Now she is still in grief. She may possibly commit suicide, despite these momentary signs of hope she just displayed in her bearing. So I must hasten to convey to her the news of Rāma's welfare and console her.

"Tonight I must speak to Sītā, alone, with words of ambrosia, denoting her Lord's welfare. I must quench the heat of her burning heart. Rāvaṇa is a Kāmarūpa (one who can assume any form he likes). It is possible that Sītā might mistake me for Rāvaṇa in disguise and begin to scream. Then Rakṣasa women will awake and, frightened, might carry the news of my arrival to Rāvaṇa. Then Rāvaṇa will fight with me. The success or failure in a duel is in the laps of the gods. And if I am defeated by Rāvaṇa, Sītā's life will be in jeopardy. In that case, this errand of mine is bound to fail. Who will then convey the news of Sītā to Rāma? I must not venture on anything with a doubtful mind. Sītā's heart is completely set on Rāma. The name of Rāma is the dearest to her. Therefore I shall chant the **name** of Rāma and deliver the message from her husband to her in sweet, mellifluous tones."

Melodiously uttering the name of Rāma, Hanumān approached Sītā, observing the features on her face. The **name** of Rāma fell on Sītā's ears, like **a** holocaust subsiding under **a** mighty shower. Sītā's burning heart felt **a** soothing comfort on hearing Rāma's name. At last she could hear the **name** of Rāma. Who in this wild Laṅkā city, in this wilderness of Aśoka grove, would chant the name of that great man? What is the reason behind this chanting? She opened her eyes and scanned the surroundings. She could see none. Since Hanumān stopped uttering Rāma's **name** for a while, she could not understand wherefrom that Rāmanāma was heard. She thought that it was just an illusion and again began musing on Rāma. Then Hanumān restarted his chanting of Rāmanāma. Hearing again that sweet name of Lord Rāma, Sītā let tears of joy fall from her eyes. The lotus of her face blossomed with sunny smiles.

NARRATION

Finding Sītā in **a** happy mood, Hanumān started singing the story of Rāma in these words, "Once upon **a** time in the Ikṣvāku

lineage, Daśaratha was ruling the kingdom of Ayodhyā. He had four sons. Rāma is the eldest of them. He is the embodiment of truth and justice, the personification of mercy, the refuge of those who seek his favour, and a man of character who achieved self-control. In order to honour his father's command, he forsook his kingly pleasures and, along with Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, went to the forest. In the absence of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa from the hermitage, Rāvaṇa abducted Sītā and brought her down to Laṅkā. Rāma is devoted to only one woman. He has no love for anyone other than Sītā and, therefore, is submerged in a sea of sorrow. Brother Lakṣmaṇa always follows him like a shadow. While Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were looking for Sītā in the R̥ṣyamūka mountains, they came upon Sugrīva, the monkey king, and made friends with him. Killing the elder brother of Sugrīva, Vālī, Rāma made the former the ruler of Kiṣkindhā. At the behest of Sugrīva, thousands of monkeys went in search of Sītā. Learning from Sampāti (the bird king) that Sītā is safe in the city of Laṅkā, I, who am the minister of Sugrīva, crossed the sea and arrived here. I looked for Sītā all over the city. I found out all the tricks of Rākṣasas. I am capable of destroying all these people. From what I learnt of Sītā's features as described by Rāma, I could see that, this saintly lady is Sītā herself. She indeed is the quintessence of all virtues. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are now safely stationed on mount Prasravaṇa."

Sītā heard with delight the story of Rāma. Is it not for such good news that she had all along been craving? She observed with care the Śimśupa tree. On a branch of it was seated, in a tiny form, the mighty Vānara (monkey) who was shining with a divine splendour. Hanumān then saluted her with raised hands. He was wearing white clothes. Humility and obedience were writ large on his features. His eyes were sparkling like burnished gold.

Sītā thought: "Who is this monkey? Who sent him here? I know Rākṣasas are Kāmarūpas, (people who can assume any shape they like). Could it be that this is Rāvaṇa in the shape of a Vānara?"

Or has her own wish assumed the form of a Vānara, she wondered. After all, this Vānara has sung the praises of Rāma in such heart-warming fashion. Her inner voice was enjoining on her not to doubt him. In order that what the Vānara told her might be

God's truth, and in order that no danger might befall her on his account, she prayed to Indra, Bṛhaspati, Agni and Brahmā. Supposing this Vānara was Rāvaṇa, why should she fear him? Would she ever yield to Rāvaṇa? He or she who loves this material life would be frightened. But she who had no fear of death, and even prepared to die rather than surrender to Rāvaṇa, why should she be afraid of him?

Hanumān is ■ great genius. He is a master of reading the thoughts of people by just looking at them. He surmised that Sītā was anxious to hear him again. Therefore he came down from the tree, and bowed to her on bended knees and prayed to her in sweet words. Then he accosted her, "Oh Mother-figure, who are you? From your sacred and sublime looks I take you for ■ divine woman. Who are your parents? Who are your parents-in-law? Judging from your physiognomy, you seem to be an empress. The man, who has you for his wife, is the luckiest of all men. Before ■ started on this search, Rāma gave me some tips about Sītā's appearance, I can see them all in you. If you are the same great lady, who was forcibly taken away from Pañcavaṭī, by Rāvaṇa, please let me know the truth. Then my purpose will be served. If you are not Sītā, forgive me for bothering you thus."

Sītā heard Hanumān with patience. Her heart melted. Tears of gratification fell from her eyes. Her entire physique felt ■ refreshing thrill. She took the monkey to be one of her well-wishers.

Sītā then started singing the praises of her husband in these words, "Oh blessed monkey, by your mere sight, my motherly heart is filled with joy. Eventhough ■ do not yet have any children of my own, I look upon the people of Ayodhyā ■ my true offspring. I feel the same love and affection for you also. My husband Rāma is the possessor of all human and divine virtues. Truth and justice are epitomised in him. In any kind of adverse circumstances, he is not given to accept charity from others. But he is prepared to fulfil the needs of any one who seeks his help. He never speaks ■ unkind word to any one. He is not in the habit of misusing his powers. There is no weapon in all the three worlds which can resist his mighty armoury.

"I have complete faith in my husband and I am keeping myself alive in the firm hope of rejoining him soon. Your narration of Rāma's greatness has delighted me inexpressibly. I shall be eternally grateful to you for bringing me the news of the well-being of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Rāvaṇa is a wicked man. He has been torturing me in various ways. He gave me two months' time before which period I have to surrender to him or else be prepared to be eaten up by him ■ part of his breakfast. Of course I ■■■ ready to die, if before the scheduled hour I am not saved from him. My only desire is that before I leave this world for the world of nothingness, I should once again feast my eyes on the sight of my noble Lord. Destiny is unpredictable. I do not know whether my fond wish will be fulfilled or not."

Hanumān's heart was filled with pity and sympathy. Realizing that he has at last seen the real Sītā, he began to console her: "Oh great lady, Rāma is like ■ father to me, just as you are like ■ mother to me. I am your spiritual child. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are striving their best to come and rescue you. Rāma sends his love to you and Lakṣmaṇa conveys his salutations to you."

Sītā Devī was more and ■■■ gratified. She told herself: "By the grace of God, Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and myself are alive. Oh, when will the day come when our trials and tribulations pass off and we all come together!"

Hanumān still has to convey his message to Sītā. He has to give her Rāma's ring as ■ token of his good faith. But he has to do it without the knowledge of the Rākṣasa women. Therefore he softly approached Sītā with folded hands.

Sītā Devī's heart had been frightfully hurt. She had to suffer from all the wiles of the Rākṣasas. Because of her former frightful experience, she still was not sure that this monkey was a true messenger from her husband. She still feared him to be Rāvaṇa in disguise, and turned away her face from him like ■ deer frightened at the sight of the hunter. Hanumān fell prostrate on the floor and bowed to her. She then said to him, "You wily man, you must be Rāvaṇa himself. The deadline you set is not yet come. Is it fair ■■ your part to harass ■■■ like this? You may kill me after the scheduled period."

Then Hanumān, to convince Sītā, described Rāma in these words: "Like the Moon who showers cool delights on the world, Rāma is one who presents the whole world with peace and prosperity. He is a prosperous man by birth. He is the living illustration of all the great qualities of men and gods. He is the equal of Mother Earth in the matter of patience. He is adept in all *Śāstras*. He observes all the codes enjoined by the ancient law-givers. He has great control over his senses. He is fond of doing his duty, unmindful of results. He knows the ways of both action and knowledge. He is a strong warrior. He is a scholar in political science. He is a wise administrator. He himself observes all the good manners of the world and makes his people follow the same great tradition. He is always helpful to the others. He never forgets the good others do to him. He earns money only to give alms. He performs all the ritual and regular duties as they should be done, at the right hours. By the sweetness of his voice and words, he attracts the people and earns their gratitude and regard. He is much honoured by saints and savants.

"Śrī Rāma is a beautiful figure in blue colour. He shines like the sun himself in his splendid mien. His hairs are like the wings of the bee and are soft and black. On his forehead are four lines and on his cheek are three dimples. His face is like the moon in its roundness and his eyes are wide and large like a lotus. His teeth are white and bright. He has a fine nose with a well-formed bridge. His lips are beautifully curved like an arrow and a silken mustache adorns his upper lip. His throat is like a Conch-shell. His chest is broad and suggests the resplendent court of cupid. His wrists are strong. His arms reach up to his thighs and his buttocks are thin and small. His nails, palms and soles are red in colour. His palms and soles have each four lines. His stomach is pressed low. His voice is deep and sweet like the sound of music. He is unconquerable like the lion, ferocious like the tiger, gigantic like the elephant and sensuously fascinating like the stud-bull. He is of a majestic height. As soon as I saw him, my heart was surrendered to him. His powerful personality made me his slave. His soul-power has entered my mind. I forgot myself and felt one with the Supreme like the sages who realize the Supreme Self. My whole body was thrilled with joy, and tears of delight dropped from my eyes. I can never forget that radiant beauty of Rāma's features. We have returned to him the bundle of ornaments which

you have dropped from the sky. He could easily recognise them as yours. Looking on them, he ~~was~~ moved to tears. Now, with unconsolable grief in his heart, he is barely subsisting on fruits and roots of the forest. Thanks to the blessings of that divine Rāma, I was able to find you. Having ~~seen~~ you, I have vindicated my honour.

“Mother Sītā, my mother is called Añjanā. So people call ~~me~~ Añjaneya, the son of Añjanā. When I was a child, I mistook the Sun-God for ~~a~~ fruit and, with the intention of swallowing him, I went up into heavens to reach him. As I peered into the outer space, my face was burnt by the terrible heat of the sun. Besides, angry at my reckless adventure, Indra hit ~~me~~ with his thunderbolt, and I fell down on a mountain. As a result of which, my left cheek (Hanumā) was broken. So people also call me Hanumān.”

At last Sītā completely believed in Hanumān’s words. She was pleasantly surprised at the divine power of Rāma who could thus attract the heart and mind and soul of a devotee like this Hanumān.

Her inner voice also reassured her that this good monkey was none other than Rāma’s trusted messenger. Thereupon Sītā told him “Oh, King of Monkeys, it is easy to see that you ~~are~~ an emancipated soul. I suspected you unreasonably. Your singing of Rāma’s praise has overwhelmed me. Oh, why did not Rāma send a messenger to ~~me~~ all these days? You say you are the messenger of Rāma. What proof can you give me of the fact?”

Then Hanumān replied, “Mother, that divine Rāma gave me the ring bearing the imprint of his name, as a token to be conveyed to you. Here it is. Take it. Good will happen to you. Rāmanāma (chanting the ~~name~~ of Rāma) is your sole refuge. May God bless you.

THE RING

Sītā examined the ring. It ~~was~~ the same ring that her father gave to Rāma ~~on~~ the occasion of their wedding. It is ~~a~~ golden one studded with several gems. As soon as she saw it, her eyes were filled with tears. In that ring, she found the smiling face of the blessed Rāma. Sītā’s joy knew no bounds. She mentally bowed to

her husband's feet. She imagined that Rāma lifted her up, embraced her and kissed her; that she asked him how it was that he could conceal such ardent love for her, for such long time; that Rāma replied that he concealed his love for her in her own heart; and that the mutual pleasure they derived was indescribable.

Hanumān stood up, with bent head, in full obedience to Sītā. She said to him, "You are no ordinary monkey. You are sure to fulfil the errand of your Lord and Master. You ■■■ both intelligent and industrious. Knowing fully well your tenacity of purpose and strength of character, Rāma deputed you. Your efforts have borne fruit. My mind has attained peace, thanks to your ambrosial words. What more do I wish for than the welfare of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa?"

'How ■■■ even God's will be fulfilled without human endeavour? Therefore you, Sugrīva, and the monkey hordes should follow Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa and come over here. You must all help Rāma in killing Rāvaṇa.'

Upon which, Hanumān replied: "Mother, you need have ■■ fears ■■■ Rāvaṇa's account. I will surely bring along with me Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Sugrīva and the monkey army. Rāma's divine weapons will surely burn down this city of Laṅkā. As soon ■■ Rāma learns that you are here, he would not tarry even ■ second on mount Prasravaṇa, where he now is. He has been pining away for you. He does not harm ■■■■ flies, mosquitoes and other worms that tease him. He is forgetful of his personal welfare and always broods over you. Whatever favourite flower or fruit, he sets his eye on, you strike his mind right away. Even in his sleep, he mutters "Sītā, Sītā". He repeatedly tells ■■ that he is alive only in the hope of rejoining you." Sītā began to regret that it ■■■ because of her that her beloved husband had to put up with all this trouble. Their mutual love is really sacred. How ■■■ there be moonlight without the moon? Similarly Rāma and Sītā ■■■ inseparable.

Sītā beautifully spoke to Hanumān: "Oh jewel of the monkey race, it is hard for the human skill to resist the will of God. Mighty Providence guides destinies of men. Rāvaṇa gave me only two months' notice. Before the deadline, my husband must ■■■■ here and rescue ■■■. Otherwise I will be lost to him.

"Rāvaṇa's brother Vibhīṣaṇa is a good man. He tried hard to get me out of this incarceration. But he failed. When Rāvaṇa is fated to die a miserable death, why would he listen to such wise counsels? Vibhīṣaṇa's wife sent their daughter Analā to me. Analā told me her father's mediation could not succeed. "In my heart of hearts I feel at ease. Just as Śacīdevi knows the might of Indra, so do I realize fully well the valour of my husband, and I firmly believe that he will resist all obstacles and come and save me." Having spoken thus, she could not, nonetheless, desist from crying.

Observing Sītā's forlorn state, Hanumān consoled her: "Mother, there is no need for you to grieve. Rāma will be here before long. Bid farewell to all your misgivings. If you have no objection, I am prepared to carry you on my shoulders to Rāma. Rāvaṇa is powerless before me. I can uproot the whole of this island of Laṅkā and carry it on my back, and, crossing the sea effortlessly, I can place it before Rāma's feet. Even if the Rākṣasas see me carrying you away, they cannot obstruct me. They cannot match my flying speed. I can take you to Rāma with far less trouble than the way Rāvaṇa snatched you away."

DOUBT

Sītā was struck with a fresh suspicion: how can this monkey in the shape of a cat carry me on his shoulders? Is it possible? Looking at her, Hanumān guessed that she has not yet been convinced of his might, power and strength. So he just went out for a while, and began growing high in stature. Gradually he assumed such a gigantic shape as to mount Meru; his face looked like a big flame; his whole aspect was awe-inspiring. He looked a fearful sight. Then he bowed to Sītā and told her: "Dear Mother, you may take it for granted that I can carry this whole island of Laṅkā, along with Rāvaṇa and his people. I have gained this power, thanks to the blessing of Śrī Rāma. So do come along with me to Rāma and say goodbye to your distress." Sītā was taken aback. Hanumān's valour and strength, might and majesty, filled her with indescribable awe. She now felt that it was because of his incomparable powers that he was chosen as Rāma's messenger. Now she was convinced that no harm would come to her because

of Rāvaṇa. It was really her great good fortune that such a hero has accepted Rāma's errand. As she heard Hanumān say that he got his powers through Rāma's blessings, she was ecstatically delighted and began to admire his fidelity to his Master. She praised in her mind the divine charm of Rāma, which could attract such powerful devotees to himself.

Then she declared to him: "Really your obedience and honesty and determination are praiseworthy. You will surely succeed in your efforts. He who goes about doing his duty, without any eye to self-aggrandisement, will always come out with flying colours. These Rākṣasas are deceitful scoundrels. They do not flinch from any kind of crime. They will attack you, and while you fight with them all your might, I might drop down from your shoulders into the sea. Not that you would be careless, but in the heat of the fight, I might lose my grip. Then definitely the sea-creatures will swallow me. After all, failure and success are in the laps of the gods. If unfortunately, you will not succeed, would Rāvaṇa spare me? He might cut me into pieces, or else he might hide me in a secret place. Then all your mighty endeavours would have been in vain. My Lord-Husband Rāma is a hero among heroes. If people come to know that you took me away clandestinely, they would say that because Rāma was afraid of Rāvaṇa, he arranged for this secret get-away. Please note that the fair name of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa must not be besmirched. You know pretty well that the life of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa is dependent on my welfare. If I perchance die, they too would put an end to their lives. So the best course of action for you is to bring them down here.

"You jewel of a monkey, I entirely believe you. However, I have an unyielding regard for Rāma. I cannot of my own free will touch another man. Of course, Rāvaṇa abducted me. It was against my will. I could have cursed him to his destruction but it is not given to a *Pativrata* (a woman devoted to one husband) to do so without the consent of her spouse. That was why I spared him. If my husband comes here and conquers Rāvaṇa, everything will be satisfactory. And his fame will be vindicated. When Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa display all their might and strength on the battlefield, who would be able to face them? When my husband, like a

ferocious lion, attacks the enemies, who can live to see the light of another day? There is no power on earth that can resist Rāma and survive. Now then, Hanumān, please go back, get Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa here and drive away all my sorrows."

Hearing Sītā's words, Hanumān was much pleased, and replied: "Mother Sītā, you really are a chaste jewel of a woman. By the mere sight of you, my life has become sacrosanct. You spoke and it became you. Truly, in the force of my flight, you might not be able to sit firmly on my shoulder. You were born and brought up in a sacred family. Willingly you would not touch any man other than your husband. These words you just spoke are the 'Veda' (scripture) of all the world's virtuous women. Only a convinced and conscientious beloved of her Lord and Master could have spoken as you did. Oh, what a fortunate lady was Mother Earth in giving birth to such an ornament to her sex like you! May your name and fame flourish as long as Sun and Moon and Stars shine in the heavens! May you always remain a symbol of chastity, the presiding deity of all the virtues of your sex!

"Dear Mother, I heard all the words you spoke to Rāvaṇa. They were heroic words of a heroine. I actually saw with my own eyes your getting ready to kill yourself. I shall recount all that happened here faithfully to Rāma. I saw your tears flowing like a torrential stream.

"In you, chastity has become personified. Your love and regard for Rāma overwhelmed me. I entirely look upon you as my mother. I only wanted to console you by assuring you that I alone could free you from this bondage. I did not really mean to carry you on my shoulders. It was just a way of encouraging you and assuring you of your eventual freedom. My sole aim is to bring you and your husband together. I am your spiritual child. Please don't think ill of me. Only, please give me a token which would convince Rāma of my having seen you. I shall show it to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa and escort them down here."

Hearing those words, Sītā was deeply moved. Hanumān's devotion and fidelity are matchless. He is a person who is prepared to sacrifice his everything for her sake. She found peace of mind. Her agony of spirit was gone. Hanumān was getting ready to take his leave of her. Then again, her heart suffered fresh anguish. She

has to wait for quite ■ while till her husband arrives in Laṅkā. She was ■■■■ afraid of the tortures and abuses she may have to put up with from Rāvaṇa and his servant-maids. However, she pulled herself together and spoke to him thus:

“Once when my husband and I were taking a stroll in the garden near Citrakūṭa, this incident happened. After a long swim in the lake, my husband was ■■ much tired and, placing his head ■■ my laps, he dozed off. Then ■ crow began to take a peck at my flesh. I did my best to drive it away. But still it continued to bite me. Alternately perching on me, and flying out again, it ■■ scratching my chest. Drops of blood from my body fell upon Rāma’s head. Consequently, he ■■ awakened. Seeing the blood he ■■■■ me the ■■■■ for my wounds. I did not reply him. He ■■ saw the crow ■■ the tree, and observed that its beak and claws were ■■■■ with blood. Then he took a piece of straw and converted it, by his power of penance, into a Brahmāstra (an invincible weapon of divine powers) and aimed it at the crow. Like ■ terrible fire emerging from the flying holocaust ■■ the end of the world, it fell on the crow. That ■■ crow ■■ none other than Jayanta, the son of Indra. There was nobody there to protect him. At last he sought Rāma’s pardon. Since my husband never punishes those who beg his forgiveness, he ■■ prepared to save him. But still, the Brahmāstra, once flung, must not be left unaimed at. So, on his own wish, it burnt the right eye of Jayanta. Dear friend, if Rāma would punish a ■■ crow with such a mighty weapon because of his love for me, with how much ■■■■ prowess would he not punish Rāvaṇa?”

Then Hanumān replied, “Mother, both Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa consider their lives worthless without you. This is not the time for you to regret anything. It was only because, they ■■ were not aware of your whereabouts that they did not yet ■■■■ to ■■■■ you. ■■■■ will come over here and destroy this island and will take you back to Ayodhyā. So please give me some token to be taken to Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sugrīva.”

At a loss to find anything substantial to send them she asked Hanumān to convey her most obedient salutations to Rāma, the news of her well-being to Lakṣmaṇa, who always looked upon her as his mother, and her gratitude to Sugrīva.

Then she remembered something.

Hanumān assured her, “Mother, there is no need for you to worry. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are themselves alive in the hope of rejoining you. Would they not hurry down here ■ soon as they

know of your whereabouts? And would not this kingdom of *Laṅkā* come under *Rāma*'s sway?"

Then *Sītā* said, "Faithfull Monkey-God, you must have been tired after all the trouble you took in crossing the sea and searching for me. Please take rest for ■ while in a secluded corner. You have really given me peace of mind in these few minutes we talked together. You have also restored my self-confidence. But after you leave me, my agony will return. However, I wish you Godspeed."

Reassuringly, *Hanumān* replied, "Mother, your heart was formerly broken. That is why you are easily discouraged. Do you think I am really happy to leave you in this forlorn state? Do you think we will tarry in returning here even one minute more than is essential? *Sugrīva* is ■ man of iron will and strong determination. He is anxious to lead his monkey army to this island, and all of us, his followers, are impatiently waiting to obey his commands. There are even mightier warriors among my race than I, who can come here as *Rāma*'s messenger. Generally kings send ordinary people like ■ as their messengers. But please rest assured that I am capable of flying up to the skies as well as penetrating into the underworld with the speed of ■ powerful breeze. Forget all your fears and doubts. Your chastity alone is your diamond-armour. I will come back here carrying *Rāma* and *Lakṣmaṇa* on my shoulders. Even at our first meeting, I offered all my strength and skill to *Śrī Rāma*. His joy is my joy, his grief is my grief, his life is my life. You have somewhat managed to while away all these miserable days. Please try your best to spend ■ days in this unhappy solitude. You must not cry. You are really the most fortunate woman on earth, because you have for your husband *Rāma*, the Lord of all Creation. There is none in all the three worlds, who is greater than he in the matter of valour. There is ■ who can be likened to *Rāma* and *Lakṣmaṇa*. Please take my word for it."

A LITTLE INCIDENT

Consoled a bit, *Sītā* said: "Have mercy on me. I will tell you about another mark of remembrance, which will further convince

Rāma. One day, the *kumkum* (sacred dot) on my forehead was wiped out. I was not aware of the fact. Then my husband in good humour put ■ beauty spot on my cheek. He will be surely remembering it all the while. So remind him of that incident. ■ will try my best to remain alive till Rāma comes here... Oh, would I be lucky enough to ■ Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa set foot on this island! Supposing I die, in the meantime, please tell Rāma from me that these ■ my last salutations to him. I shall never forget your kind help. May God bless you and me.”

Hanumān's eyes were filled with tears. Sītā also was shedding tears. Only through mere exchange of glances could they took leave of each other. Accepting her silent blessings, Hanumān left her. Then she found a great void all about her. She began to worry about what would happen to her now.

Hanumān thought: “I could see Sītā. I got her blessings for my good luck. Rāvaṇa is ■ fool. Wise counsels will not have any effect ■ him. Since he is ■ wealthy man himself, he could not be won over with alms-giving. Since he is ■ very powerful man, even gods in Heavens tremble before him. That is why even statecraft will be of no use. So the only thing that will bring him to his knees is punishment. Only bravery will be effective in his case. He who fulfils his master's command without any mistakes, is ■ worthy servant. In order to see through any task, ■ man has to take recourse to every kind of strategy. If I can spy on Rāvaṇa's armed might, I ■ be of great help to my army, in that we will be forewarned. So I will devise a way in which Rāvaṇa, his army, and his ministers will appear before me in their true guises.”

STRATEGY

Hanumān further told himself: “Aśoka garden is dear to Rāvaṇa. If I destroy it, he will surely lose his temper and balance of mind, and send his armies to fight with me. I shall battle with them with all my might. Thereby they will have some taste of my prowess. Moreover, I shall be happy to go back to Kiṣkindhā with this victory to my credit.” Thinking thus, and praying to Rāma in his mind, he increased his body to the size of mount Meru. Thereupon he began to root out all the saplings and trees in the

garden. Even gigantic trees were uprooted with ease and thrown up into the skies. He pounded all the pleasure mounds into powder. He broke up all the little museums with their valuable pictures and statues. All the birds and beasts therein ran hither and thither.

On hearing this hubbub, the Rākṣasa women woke up. They saw the frightening form of Hanumān and were struck speechless. Their figures shivered with fear. Afraid of what would befall them on his account, they turned to Sītā and asked her: "Who is this monkey? Who sent him here? For what purpose was he here? What did he tell you? Tell ■ the truth."

Sītā replied, "You Rākṣasa women, you are all skilled in disguising yourselves. You should be well aware of this man's wiles. A snake itself knows the tricks of the other snakes. I saw him only just now. I myself ■ wondering whether this monkey might not be Rāvaṇa in disguise or the God of death himself must have assumed this form in order to kill Rāvaṇa. Otherwise how ■ this monkey increase his body into such ■ ferocious size?" The Rākṣasa women were further frightened. Some of them went up to Rāvaṇa and told him: "Lord, ■ monkey of immense power and size met Sītā in the Aśoka Garden. We have repeatedly asked her to tell us all about him. She would not enlighten us. We are wondering whether he might not be Rāma's messenger. He has destroyed the Aśoka Garden completely. All the inmates of the Zoo flew away. Seeing his ferocious figure, our hearts were broken with fright. Only Sītā is unmoved. He has not uprooted the *Irugu* tree which is sheltering her. So we conclude that he must be a well-wisher of hers. He formerly conversed with Sītā on some matters, which we could not understand. There must be some conspiracy in all this. We feel that it is right that he should be killed right away."

Rāvaṇa heard them with increasing anger and sent some powerful soldiers to arrest Hanumān. They fell upon him like moths in the fire. They were armed with spears, maces and other wild weapons. Hanumān, fretting with revenge, threw up his tail, and jumping into the air, created ■ terrific sound all around. He beat his chest and gesticulated with his arms in preparation for the fight. As ■ result of his vigorous shouts, ■■■ the birds in the sky

fell down to the earth. The whole island of Laṅkā shook up. He told the Rākṣasa soldiers, "May the mighty Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa and Sugrīva live and win for ever. You Rākṣasas, hear me. I am the servant of Śrī Rāma, the ornament of Raghu dynasty. My mother is Añjanā. I am, therefore, otherwise known as Āñjaneya. I can wield any weapon with unfailing power. Even a thousand Rāvaṇas are no match for me. I can burn this kingdom of Laṅkā before your eyes, bow to Sītā Devī and return to Kiṣkindā."

Looking at Hanumān's awe-inspiring shape, Rāvaṇa's soldiers were struck with fear. However, they could not disobey the command of their king. So they fought with him, using all their various weapons to the best of their ability. But even the most fierce weapons of theirs broke down without any effect on Hanumān. Hanumān was laughing in his sleeve for their idiocy. He pulled up the iron gates erected at the entrance of the Aśoka Garden and flung them on the army and slayed them all.

HERO'S TALE

Rāvaṇa heard the news of the death of his soldiers at the hands of Hanumān. He could not understand who that monkey was. He was much perturbed. Then he sent the valiant Jambumāli and some other Rākṣasa heroes to fight with Hanumān. Jambumāli is the son of Prahasta. He is a powerful archer. He set out making a threatening noise with his bowstring. That sound echoed from earth to heaven. Jambumāli struck Hanumān on his head with his weapons. They hurt him much. Consequently Hanumān became very angry and began to hurl mighty trunks and trees at Jambumāli. Jambumāli not only cut those into pieces but also rejoined the fight with more powerful weapons. Hanumān's body became bloody. He then flung himself upon Jambumāli and struck him with his iron mace. Jambumāli was dead. His corpse lay there. But still, Hanumān's anger was not abated. He has pulled out golden pillars supporting the compound-wall of the garden and hurled them around. The scattered lights on the pillars caused big flames to erupt. Those flames burnt down the pleasure garden and the surrounding pleasure palaces. With those fiery pillars, he killed the rest of Jambumāli's army and then flew up into the sky. From there he saw the splendour of the City of Laṅkā. With a

lion-like voice, he addressed the people of Lañkā thus: "Oh, Citizens of Lañkā, I came from the kingdom of Kiṣkindha. I am the minister of its great king, Sugrīva. I am the messenger and servant of Śrī Rāma. It was I, who was instrumental in bringing Rāma and Sugrīva together. In order to find out where Sītā is, they both thought that there was none better suited than I, and deputed me here. Soon Sugrīva, along with Rāma, will enter this city. Rāvaṇa, who is guilty of the sin of abducting a chaste woman like Sītā, is sure to suffer for his folly. None of you can withstand the onslaught of our monkey army. The God of Death is waiting for you. You yourselves will see how this city of yours will become an offering to the God of Fire and how this beautiful Island will turn into a burial-ground."

Rāvaṇa heard the news of the death of Jambumālī. His eyes were wet. The denizens of the city, hearing the thundering words of Hanumān, were frightened for their future. But who among them can make Rāvaṇa change his mind? Rāvaṇa then sent his ministers' sons to punish Hanumān. They showered their arrows on him. Hanumān jumped upon them, and hitting them with his palms and fists, and tearing their flesh with his nails and pounding them on the chest, he killed them all. Those who were still unpunished took to their heels. Hearing the fiery noise made by Hanumān, the elephant hordes went amuck; the horses fell to the ground. The flagmasts and the wheels of the chariots broke up into shreds. Flocks of birds dropped dead on the streets. Scanning the weakness and strength, and the political and military strategy of the Rākṣasas, and again ready for renewed fight, Hanumān was waiting at the gates of the outer wall of Aśoka garden.

Yet again the news of Hanumān's invincibility and valour reached Rāvaṇa and struck him with fear. Then he called Virūpākṣa, Yūpākṣa, Durdhara, Praghosa, Bhāsa, and other aides of his, who were well-versed in the crafts of war and peace, and addressed them thus: "Oh heroes, you go along with your chariots, elephants, horses and footmen, and subdue that monkey. Judging from his deeds, it seems, he is not an ordinary monkey. Was it not through your help, that I could conquer the Gods, angels, and the archangels? I am wondering whether this *vānara* (monkey) is a sprite who was created by Indra and sent upon us to take his revenge. You must, without killing him, capture him and

bring him to me. I formerly saw Vāli, Sugrīva, Jāmbavan, Nīla, Dvīda and other monkey heroes. But I think none of them had this monkey's power of speedy and destructive genius. I could not see in them the like of this monkey's skill of fighting, audacity, enthusiasm and heroism. I know that there are none in the three worlds who excel you in strength. But who can foresee the result of a battle? However, those who wish to win must always protect themselves. So you go about your task with the necessary caution."

At the behest of Rāvaṇa, the Rākṣasa heroes took up fierce weapons and, accompanied by their soldiers, went up to the Aśoka garden. There they saw with wonder Hanumān who was waiting at the gate like a burning sun. They could very well understand the truth of Rāvaṇa's description of him. Thereupon Durdhara commanded the army to surround Hanumān and fling their spears on him.

Hanumān was severely wounded. That made him all the more revengeful and flying up into Space, he increased his bodily stature. Similarly Durdhara also jumped into the sky. Making a lion-like noise, Hanumān flung on the Durdhara's chariot and broke it into pieces. Durdhara who was inside the chariot fell down and lost his life. Then Hanumān wielded a chariot to destroy other chariots, an elephant to slay other elephants, a horse to kill other horses, and finally vanquished the footmen with his bodily prowess. Still, he was not satisfied with his killings. He was again prepared to take more enemies and stood in expectation of a fight like Lord Śiva at the time of Doomsday(*pralaya*.)

Rāvaṇa heard the news of the fall of his newly-despatched set of heroes and was filled with greater sorrow. He looked at his son, Akṣaya. He saw he was ready to fight with Hanumān. Attendants brought up the golden chariot of Akṣaya before him. They placed different kinds of weapons in it. To it, they attached horses possessing the speed of wind. That chariot, which was obtained through the boon of penance, is capable of flying in the sky. Akṣaya bid farewell to his father and went up to Aśoka garden. He could see that Hanumān, who resembled mount Meru, was waiting for him. Akṣaya's wrath redoubled. With a firm grip, he showered arrows on Hanumān. Hanumān was unmoved.

Akṣaya realized that this monkey ■■■ capable of withstanding any amount of punishment from the weapons of his enemies. So he personally jumped upon him. Then ensued ■ severe fight between the two. Deep wounds were formed on Hanumān's face. Blood streamed forth from them and got into his eyes. Hanumān was pleased with the strength and heroism of Akṣhaya. Then they both jumped up into the sky. Renewed fight began with greater ferocity. Akṣaya is a great archer. He covered the region of the sky with his arrows. As Hanumān was trying to escape from the snare of the arrows, two of them pierced into his heart and filled him with great pain.

Still roaring like ■ lion, Hanumān thought: "Akṣaya is adept in archery. He is also skilled in statecraft. Although young in age, he is heroic in action. He is very keen on fighting with me. If I neglect to fight back, I will regret it. It is a folly to overlook danger and play with fire. If I kill this Rākṣasa now, Sugrīva's task will become easier."

Having come to ■ decision, he jumped upon Akṣaya's chariot, killed his horses and struck at the chariot. The chariot broke down into pieces and they were flung hither and thither. Thereupon Akṣaya, taking up bow and arrow, ■ well as sword, jumped up into the sky. Hanumān is quite capable of rising to the occasion. He took hold of Akṣaya's feet and whirling him around, threw him down upon the earth. Akṣaya's body became ■ ■■■ of blood. Gods were full of admiration for Hanumān. Again Hanumān approached the outer gate of Aśoka garden and was prepared for further fight.

Rāvaṇa was filled with anger and grief ■■ hearing the ■■■ of the end of Akṣaya. He called upon his son, Indrajit and told him. "Son, you pleased Brahmā and received several invincible weapons from him. You are a hero who conquered Indra himself. There is ■■■ who can overcome you in all the three worlds. Your steadfastness and valour are your diamond-armours. That monkey is no ordinary mortal. He has already vanquished Jambumāli and other great heroes. You know all about the sciences of politics and statecraft. There is nothing impossible for one who launches upon an action with proper forethought. You are my equal in strength and heroism. It is because of you, that I ■■ unworried. I have

complete faith in you. You must know that the monkey's pace of fight is matchless. He is the peer of God Agni himself. You must engage in battle with him with due care. It seems no weapon is capable of destroying him. Although I don't like the idea of sending you to fight against such a person, I cannot help my action because the welfare of the State demands it. You are bound to succeed in your efforts, if you face him with self-confidence. I am agog to hear the news of your success."

Indrajit is a fighter of inimitable strength. In fact, he is more valiant than his father. His sole aim is to banish his father's grief. He is fully aware of the fact that his father was suffering from the distress caused by the death of Akṣaya. So it is his bounden duty to take revenge upon that *Vānara*. He knows that he is the conqueror of the three worlds, a seasoned politician and a trained archer. What more does he wish for than pleasing his father?

CAPTURE

Indrajit walked around his father as a token of reverence and saluted his feet, before embarking on his task. His friends, followers and relatives bade him farewell with applause. He was ready to fight with Hanumān. A chariot made of gold, and drawn by horses which have the speed of the divine bird Garuḍa, was ready for him. Indrajit got in and, along with his army, went up to the outer gate of Aśoka Garden.

Hearing the noise of the chariot wheels and the arrow-struck sound made by Indrajit, Hanumān got ready for the fight with renewed pleasure.

Seeing Hanumān, Indrajit thought: "This *Vānara* does not seem to be an ordinary one. His face is resplendent with divine brilliance. He must be a spy who has come to study the secrets of the city of Laṅkā. If I take pity on him and let him go scotfree, there is no knowing what dangers will befall us. So I must arrest him and take him to the King's palace. There the citizens of Laṅkā will mock at him and naturally my father will give him due punishment. Then he attacked Hanumān with various divine weapons. At the sound arising from those attacking weapons, the whole space between earth and heaven was echoing with terrible sound. One sharp arrow struck Hanumān. Then he got wild and roaring like a lion and increasing his physique, he rejoined Indrajit

in fight. In order to look at the great fight between the two heroes, the demigods, angels, archangels and other inhabitants of Heaven were standing in a row in the sky. Indrajit's arrows proved to be futile. With ■■■ uncanny speed, Hanumān was evading the arrows. Indrajit was filled with fright.

Realizing that it is impossible to conquer the *Vānara*, with these weapons, he released his greatest weapon, called *Brahmāstra*, upon him. The *Brahmāstra* made Hanumān helpless. Knowing fully well that it is not in his power to be freed from this *Brahmāstra*, the monkey lord sought the favour of *Brahmā*. Hanumān was reminded of the boon that *Brahmā* granted him once upon ■ time. That boon was that no weapon could kill Hanumān and he would die only of his own free will. So Hanumān's exuberance has increased. He began to visualise that this *Brahmāstra* would indirectly enable him to see *Rāvaṇa* and talk to him. Realizing that Indrajit has given him ■ blessing in disguise, he feigned helplessness and kept quiet.

Hanumān is farsighted and capable of judging the situation ■ it arises. He did not mind the way the *Rākṣasas* were binding him with ropes and threads. He only thought: "Indrajit will take ■■■ to *Rāvaṇa* in these bonds. Seeing the sight, not only *Rāvaṇa* but the whole of *Laṅkā* city will be pleased. In his momentary joy, the Lord of *Laṅkā* will abuse ■■■ unfearingly. He will one day have to suffer for his unwise slander of me." Hanumān felt that he was freed from the grip of the *Brahmāstra*. He shook himself and regained his former prowess. *Rākṣasas* are indeed fools. They are not aware of the fact that if they add some other bonds to the (original capturing powers of) *Brahmāstra*, its effect will be null and void. If they waste the *Brahmāstra* thus, no other weapon will be of any use. A man must not engage upon any deed without proper prethinking. Only Indrajit knows how the *Brahmāstra* works. His soldiers were unaware of the secret of the *Brahmāstra* and so acted thoughtlessly. How mysterious are the ways of the fate! Even knowingly, Indrajit did a mistake. Otherwise he would have warned his followers of their folly beforehand. Perhaps, *Sarasvatī*, the Goddess of Speech, struck his tongue dead.

Indrajit was confounded in the extreme. Would his father blame him? What ■■■ he do now? Knowingly he did not make any mistake. So he was ■ sure that his father would forgive him.

Beating him with their fists, the Rākṣasas dragged Hanumān towards the palace of Rāvaṇa. Hanumān decided upon putting up with their blows without any thought of revenge just yet. Oh, how great is his loyalty to his master! Verily, Lord Śrī Rāma, whom he has placed on the pedestal of his heart, has granted him this power of endurance. Hanumān is such a devoted servant that he is prepared to bear any amount of pain and anguish with pleasure in order that his choice ■ Rāma's messenger might be completely justified.

Indrajit placed Hanumān before the citizens of Laṅkā. They were all pleased that this monkey who looked like a wild elephant got his due. They began to ask themselves: "Who is this fellow? Who sent him here? What is his business here? Who gave him shelter here? Is this the same monkey that destroyed the Aśoka garden? Surely, this fellow deserves to be thrown into flames or he must be chewed and eaten up. Better he be killed through torture." They also began to gnash their teeth.

Hanumān was laughing inwardly. The Rākṣasas took him to the Court. At Rāvaṇa's feet, his ministers were standing with bent heads. The Lord of Laṅkā appeared to Hanumān like a fool who invited the reward of the God of Death through his bondage to the seven deadly sins. Seeing Hanumān, Rāvaṇa was wild with anger. Is this the monkey who killed Akṣaya and the trusted ministers of his? Sparks of fire were blazing forth from Rāvaṇa's eyes. His heart turned into stone. All that he was concerned about was vengeance. He was thinking of the best kind of punishment that could be meted out to this wild monkey.

INTERVIEW

At first Hanumān was under the impression that if he destroyed the Aśoka Garden, Rāvaṇa would come to him. But as it happened, he himself had to go to the Court of Rāvaṇa.

Rāvaṇa was bedecked with a pearl crown and various ornaments made of diamonds and other precious stones. His face was smeared with musk and other perfumed ointments, and they all gave him a terrifying look. His teeth are sharp and his lips are

crimson and his ten heads were shining with a frightening resplendence. The pearl necklace adorning his black chest was shining like the light of full moon. His arms and shoulders adorned with curved bracelets suggested the sight of hellish snakes. He was seated upon a throne studded with the nine varieties of gems. Beautiful women were fanning him. Surrounded by his ministers, Durdhara, Prahasta, Mahāpārśva, Nikumbha, and others, he looked like mount Meru. Looking at all this splendour, Hanumān forgot his personal pain, and began to admire Rāvaṇa's pomp.

*Aho rūpamaho dhairyamaho satṭvamaho dyutiḥ,
Aho rākṣarājasya sarvalakṣṇayuktatā
yadyadharmo na balavān syādayam rakṣaseśvaraḥ,
Syādayam suralokasya sa śakrasyāpi rakṣitā,
Aham hyutsahate kruddhaḥ kartumekārṇavam jagat.*

"Oh what a striking appearance has this man! How great is his courage! How impressive is his personal grace! He is sparkling with every kind of personal charm. If he did not suffer from his lack of justice and fairplay, he would have ruled the whole universe, even better than Indra. Perhaps because this man is a cruel one, all the worlds are frightened by him. If he becomes wild with anger, he is capable of turning the whole earth upside down."

Rāvaṇa, who looks upon the torturing of the three worlds as his chief sport, was struck with a doubt. When formerly he shook Mount Kailāsa, Nandī cursed him. Could it be that this Vānara be Nandī in disguise? However much he figured it out, his doubt was not resolved. Verily, where is peace of mind for a man who has a suspicious mind?

Rāvaṇa asked Prahasta: "Who is this monkey? What is his idea in destroying Aśoka Garden and terrifying the Rākṣasa women? How could he enter this island of Laṅkā which is surrounded by a mighty ocean? Is he a Kāmarūpa? What is the reason behind his battling with us? Ask him and let him know." To Rāvaṇa, who is blinded by pride and prejudice, Hanumān looked a negligible entity. He thought it was below his dignity to converse with this monkey directly. To kings and rich men, discourtesy towards lesser men is a form of hobby. It is this discourtesy that leads to several ills. After all, respecting the messenger is the duty

of a king. If one threatens him, it is impossible to gauge the strength and weakness, and the secrets of the enemy. Vanity and pride drive away a man's sense of proportion. If one loses his sense of what is right and wrong, one would not only lose his kingdom, his fortune and his friends and relatives, but also his very self. Otherwise, why would not a hero and a group of austere habits like Rāvaṇa talk to Hanumān face to face? It was this uncivility that provoked Hanumān to burn up Laṅkā. Prahasta asked Hanumān: "Oh monkey, don't be afraid. We do not mean any harm to you. By appearance, you look like a monkey. But your personal splendour is bewildering us. Tell us the truth. Whose messenger are you? Has Devendra or Kubera or Yama or Varuṇa sent you as their spy? Or did Lord Viṣṇu who is always fond of fresh victories, sent you? What is the real reason behind your coming here? Why did you destroy the Aśoka Garden? What made you fight with the Rākṣasa heroes? What purpose did you hope to serve thereby? If you speak the truth, you will be freed. If you lie, you will not be spared with your life. Then your errand will also fail."

WISE COUNSEL

No failure must attend Rāma's errand. Whatever onslaughts he might have to suffer he must not forsake his patience and perseverance. So he tried to convince Rāvaṇa of his folly through advice. Accordingly he said: "I was not sent here by Indra or Yama or Varuṇa or Kubera. I am just an ordinary monkey. I have come here because I heard much of your fame and fortune, and wanted to see you. I know it is not easy for common people to get a glimpse of you. So I had to take the crooked step of destroying the Aśoka Garden. Naturally, hearing the news of my action, you sent the Rākṣasa heroes to punish me. I had to fight with them in self-defence. I cannot be bound by any weapon or knot wielded either by demi-gods or Rākṣasas. As I said, it was because of my wish to see you, I remained without struggle under this spell of Brahmāstra, cast on me by Indrajit. Your foolish followers tied me up with pieces of cloth and ropes. Then the effect of Brahmāstra was gone. I allowed myself to be brought here by your servants, although I had the power to resist them and free myself. I am the messenger of Śrī Rāma, the pearl of Raghu dynasty. I thought it would be good for everyone concerned, if I had a talk with you. Hear my words with patience."

He proceeded to say, "Oh Lord of Lañkā, I am an inhabitant of Kiṣkindhā. I have come here under the orders of Sugrīva, its King. Sugrīva is like a brother to you and he wishes you well. He sent a message through me. Listen to it.

"Śrī Rāma is the eldest of Daśaratha's sons. He is an invincible personage, ■ personification of all virtues and an embodiment of justice and fair play. He is always merciful towards those who seek his succour. His wife Sītādevī is ■ woman of immaculate character. She was found by the Lord of Mithilā, the pious king Janaka, in ■ ploughshare. Rāma, accompanied by Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa ■■■ down to Daṇḍaka forest, following his father's wishes. One day he could not find Sītā on his return to his cottage. While searching for Sītā, Rama and Lakṣmana came up to mount R̥ṣyamūka. You know all about the valour of Vāli. Vāli bore ■■ unreasonable grudge against his brother Sugrīva. He abducted Sugrīva's wife Ruma, and banished him from the Kingdom of Kiṣkindhā. So Sugrīva was forced to seek shelter upon mount R̥ṣyamūka. When Rāma arrived there, they both became friends. Rāma promised him that he would kill Vāli and make him the king of Kiṣkindhā. In his turn, Sugrīva promised Rāma that he would fetch Sītā. Rāma killed Vāli with a divine weapon and made Sugrīva king of Kiṣkindhā. Sugrīva is a grateful person. In order to find the whereabouts of Sītā, he sent his monkey army to the four corners of the earth. Among these soldiers, there are powerful persons who are capable of piercing into the wether world (pātāla) and flying up to the high Heaven. In their power of speed, they excel even the divine bird Garuḍa and the God of Air (Vāyu). My mother is named Āñjanā. So I am otherwise known as Āñjaneya.

"Oh Rāvaṇa, I have come here in search of Sītā Devī. At first ■ could not find her. My heart was bowed down with grief. At last my sight fell on her under the Śimsupā tree. In her, chastity is embodied. All these days she has been surviving on her last breath merely to rejoin Rāma. In her heart there is place for none but Rāma. You know all the laws of justice. You are a great person, who attained several boons from the gods, thanks to your penance. Is it right on the part of such ■ sacred man ■■ you to covet another man's wife? After all, many beautiful ladies ■■ in your harem. You can always enjoy yourself in their company. Such

craze for Sītā is not worthy of a wise man like you. You must realize that by engaging yourself in such wild and unjust deeds, you will come to grief and your whole race will perish.

“Oh Lord of Rākṣasas! Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are powerful heroes. The heroic blood of Ikṣvāku clan is flowing in their veins. Beware of the fire of their wrath. Their divinely blessed weapons can burn up all the three worlds. None who offends Rāma can escape him with impunity. Sugrīva asked me to tell you that what you did was against all canons of justice and that you must restore Sītā to Rāma rightaway. It is but natural to err. But it is the characteristic of a wise man to set it right when he realizes his folly. Remember your allegiance to the duty of Dharma. Thereby all good will come to you.

I shall soon inform Śrī Rāma of the whereabouts of Sītā. Then he will come over here to gain his victory over you.

*Lakṣiteyam mayā Sītā mātā śokaparāyaṇā,
Gṛhya yām nābhijānāsi pañcasyāmiva pannagīm.
Ne'yam jarayitum śakyā sā srairamarairapi,
viśasamsṛṣṭamatyartham bhuktamannamivāñjasā.*

Keeping that chaste lady in this island is like going to bed with a five-headed cobra. However hungry a man is, can he digest poisonous food? So, mind you, you can never make Sītā your own.”

GOOD ADVICE

Hanumān further told Rāvaṇa, “By virtue of your penance, you gained the assurance of longevity. You would make worthless all that you have obtained by resorting to foul play. Would you kick away all the good that years of austerity brought you, by now becoming slave to unworthy passion? You did achieve the blessing from the gods that you would not be killed either by Rākṣasas or by demi-gods. But remember that Sugrīva does not belong to either of these races. He is the Lord of Vānaras, the king of Kiṣkindha, the preserver of truth and a valiant person. You can never hope to escape from his punishment.

*Prāptam dharmaphalam tāvat, bhavatā nātra samśayah,
Phalamasyāpi adharmasya kṣiprameva prapatsyase.*

“Oh King, Dharma will conquer Adharma. This is the naked truth. Hitherto you have enjoyed extreme power and incomparable luxury because of the good deeds you formerly did. Now you will taste the fruits of your foul deeds. You will soon have a taste of Rāma’s strength and power.

*Sarvam lokān susamhṛtya sabhūtān sacarā carān,
Punareva tathā sraṣṭum śakto rāmo mahāyaśāh,
Sarvalokeśvarasyaiṅva kṛtvā vipriyam uṭtamam,
Rāmasya rājasimhasya durlabham tava jīvitam.*

“Do you not know that it was Rāma who killed all the Rākṣasas in Janasthāna in his wish to punish the wicked and defend the virtuous? Don’t you know that it was Rāma who killed the mighty Vālī with just one blessed weapon of his? Rāma’s heart is as soft as butter and as hard as diamond, according to the merits of the receiver’s qualities. His friendship for Sugrīva is unbreakable. His condemnation of your bad deed is similarly irrevocable. So beware of his vengeance and note that you can never hope for victory.

“Oh Lord of Laṅkā, you are now sure of yourself because of your powerful army. I myself can destroy you and all this armed force of yours with one stroke. Śrī Rāma took a vow in the presence of monkey-heroes that he himself would kill the abductor of Sītā. That is why I refrained from killing you all. I don’t want to come in the way of Rāma’s fulfilling his vow. Even the Lords of the heavens hesitate to offend Śrī Rāma. To such a hero you are of little reckoning.

*Yām site’ti abhijānāsi ye’yam tiṣṭhati te vaśe,
Kālarātrīti tām viddhi sarvalaṅkā vināśinīm.
Tadalam kāla pāśena sītā vighraha rūpiṇā,
Svayam skandhāvasaktena kṣaṇamātmani chintyatām.*

You seem to be under the mistaken impression that Sītā is an ordinary woman. But take note that she is the black night which will cover up the city of Laṅkā and eventually its annihilation. You are going to throttle yourself with the fateful noose which has now come to you in the form of Sītā. Look up into the sky. There the Lords of the hosts and the constellations are mocking you. Look at the God of Death, he is beckoning you. By virtue of Sītā’s fire of chastity, this Laṅkā will be burnt. You will

be able to see with your own eyes the sight of this city of yours turning into ashes. Believe me, this whole clan of Rākṣasas will be wiped out by the wrath of Rāma which you brought upon yourself.

“Oh King, I am the follower of Śrī Rāma. I know all about his powers. To me both mankind and the demon race mean the same. I am an impartial monkey. I am speaking the truth dispassionately. Śrī Rāma is the very incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu. He is the source of creation, existence and destruction. There are none in the three worlds who resist him. You caused that great personage an unforgivable hurt. When that heroic fighter flings his weapons at you, even the Trinity in Heaven cannot come to your rescue. So return to Rāma the Divine Mother Sītā Devī and become worthy of his mercy. Thereby your fame will remain for ever in the three worlds. Rāvaṇa, if you want to see that gracious Rāmā adorning my chest right now, I will tear it open and show him to you. Perhaps, if you take a glimpse of his benign presence, your stony heart may melt and you may come to your senses and realize what sort of an enemy you are opposing.”

KING'S DECISION

Despite his anger, Rāvaṇa began to think calmly: “This Vānara does not seem to be an ordinary one. He says that in Kiṣkindhā, there are many other vānaras who are his betters. Vāli's valour is renowned. Could it not be his brother Sugrīva his equal? And how great must be the strength and courage of Rāma who could kill Vāli with his divinely blessed weapons? It must have been God's will that Rāma should have formed a friendship with Sugrīva. But I, who could conquer all the Lords of Heaven, all the elements and even the Sun and Moon, must I fear these ordinary monkeys, these wretched men? Of course, this vānara is a worthy messenger. From his words it is easy to see that he is well-versed in Vedas and Vedāṅgas. The Goddess of Education, Sarasvatī, is dancing on his lips. Besides, he is apparently well-equipped with statecraft and political acumen. However, even if his words are justifiable and reasonable, they must not be implicitly obeyed. If I now yield up Sītā to Rāma, people would say that Rāvaṇa was afraid of Rāma, and would laugh at me. Even the gods will make fun of me. If Rāma was such a real personification of Dharma, would he stoop to such an act of killing a woman? Would he kill

Tātakā, would he humiliate Śurpaṇakha? Would he mercilessly destroy so many Rākṣasas in Janasthāna? Why should I surrender Sītā to such an unjust Rāma?

“If Rāma is really a better soldier than I, I will fight him on the battlefield, as befitting a hero and die a noble death. And as for Hanumān, a person who accepts the role of messenger should behave with due courage and obedience, in order to fulfill his master’s task. Whereas, this fellow has destroyed the Aśoka garden which is dear to me. He has unflinchingly put me to shame through the destruction of my trusted soldiers and exceeded the limits to which a messenger could go. If I kill this vānara now, Rāma will have no chance of learning the whereabouts of Sītā, and, consequently, will kill himself. And when Sītā hears the news of Rāma’s possible death, she would take her own life. And if Sītā and Rāma die, would Lakṣmaṇa and Sugrīva survive them? So, considering everything, the best course is to kill this messenger.”

Accordingly, Rāvaṇa commanded Prahasta to kill Hanumān. Verily the Sanskrit saying *Vināśa kāle viparīta buddhiḥ* (Self-destructive thoughts occur when one is faced with death) has been true in the case of Rāvaṇa. Destiny is inviolable. Who can swim against the current of time and predestination.

Among Rāvaṇa’s brothers, Vibhiṣaṇa is farsighted. He can weigh the pros and cons of all actions and judge the situation, according to its merits. He can speak the right word at the right time in the right place. He is a genius and has the learning of a gifted person. He is also of a gentle nature and capable of advising Rāvaṇa with due care. Therefore when he heard Rāvaṇa’s ill-judged command, he could not keep quiet.

He admonished Rāvaṇa thus, “Brother, you are perfectly familiar with all aspects of law and justice. You are always grateful to those who do you a good turn. You know the ways and means of performing the kingly duties and responsibilities. You are a master of a statecraft.

*Na dharmavāde na hi lokavṛtte
na śāstra buddhi grahaṇeṣu cāpi.
Vidyeta kaścit tava vīra tulyaḥ
hyuttamaḥ surāsurāṇām.*

"You are incomparable in administering justice. You are not one to forget the obligations and edicts enjoined on us by tradition. You stand alone in the acquisition of power. You are really a jewel among Rākṣasas as well as demi-gods.

"Dear brother, anger destroys balanced judgement. So bid farewell to your anger and become sane and sensible. It is against all canons of kingly justice to kill another king's messenger. A farsighted man should never have recourse to such a step. True, this vānara has done many deeds, which are unjust, and killed Akṣaya and many worthy sons of our soil. It is equally true that this man deserves some punishment. But in any circumstances, it is not right that a messenger should be killed. There are other ways of punishing him like whipping him, pulling out his hair, tattooing him, maiming him and so on. But an envoy must never be killed, I repeat. After all, what will you gain by killing this vānara? You must kill the people who sent him here.

He is only a servant of another man. He just repeats his master's message. In doing so, he should not be blamed. You can always kill your enemies boldly face to face. If you kill this vānara, who will inform Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sugrīva of Sītā's whereabouts? How will, then, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa come here? Don't you know that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are no match for you? Don't you know that you have many unconquerable Rākṣasa heroes in your service? They could surely capture Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa and bring them to you. So if you want to communicate to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa the news of the might of the Rākṣasas, you must release this vānara."

Rāvaṇa accepted Vibhīṣaṇa's advice, and said, "You spoke rightly and opportunely. I admit that it is wrong to kill an envoy. Yes, It is permissible to insult him. To the monkey his tail is extremely important. So we shall set fire to this vānara's tail. Then he will fight shy of returning to his people. If he returns to Kiṣkindhā all the same, he is sure to be laughed at by his folks. Looking at his burnt tail Sugrīva, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa will be taken aback and his fellow monkeys might get the impression that their tails will also be burnt if they go to Laṅkā and may not be prepared to come here to fight with us. So burn this fellow's tail and take him around the town. If he sees the Rākṣasa women scoffing at him, he merely gets what he deserves."

BURNING OF LANKĀ

On Rāvaṇa's orders, his followers tied rags to Hanumān's tail, dipped it in oil and set it on fire. Hanumān's face was flushed. His eyes became bloodshot. From the corners of his eyes sparks of angry fire emanated. It was these sparks that became the initial ignition for the destruction of Laṅkā. Hanumān is one who was born with the blessings of the God of Air (Vāyu). The God of Fire (Agni) is the friend of the God of Air. If they both combine in their ways of annihilation, could anything prevent Laṅkā's burning to ashes? The joy of the God of Fire was boundless. He was glad that he was able to do his bit for Rāma and burn Rāvaṇa's Laṅkā. Hanumān felt no pain because of the fire in his tail. All over Laṅkā the news that the monkey's tail was set on fire became known. They were pleased that the vānara got his due punishment, and came out in their thousands to see the sight of his sufferings. Lest he run away, they bound him up with strong ropes.

Hanumān thought: "What idiots these Rākṣasas are! Could these people really face my might? I can snap these bonds and fly up into the sky in a second. I can also kill these people at one stroke. These people are trying to put obstacles in the way of the fulfilment of Rāma's task. Rāma himself granted me the power to destroy Rāvaṇa and his race completely. These Rākṣasas will take me to the interior city. Then I will have a good chance of finding out its secrets.

Oh! what a cruel punishment Rāvaṇa meted out to Hanumān! Would such a sin go unpunished? Would Hanumān spare Laṅkā? Perhaps the time for the uprooting of the whole Rākṣasa race has approached.

The Rākṣasas took Hanumān out into the streets of the Laṅkā. Behind him many musicians were playing several instruments making much noise, as if in celebration of a festival. Although his tail was burning, Hanumān felt no pain. Enthusiastically he glanced around and gauged Rāvaṇa's strength and weakness. The Rākṣasas were mocking at him. But still he kept quiet. He was bent upon offering these people a sweet revenge.

The Rākṣasas carried the news of Hanumān's tail being burnt to Sītā. She was much distressed. Oh, was it not because of her

that this ornament of the monkey **■** had to put up with so much anguish?

Sītā thought, “On my account Hanumān had to endure this pain. Oh, how great is his loyalty to his master! Was it not for my sake that Rāma sent him here? If any harm should happen to him, how could Rāma know about my present position? If he does not get Hanumān’s message, how could Rāma come here? Am I really fated never **■** to **■** Rāma? And yet, Hanumān is a strong, sturdy person, besides being a genius who **■** face up to any eventuality. He is a master of statecraft and martial tactics. Would he not be able to rid himself of these bonds? I am wondering whether there is not more in this than meets the eye. The Lord of fire is **■** who sanctifies the downtrodden and the fallen. Would he really persecute this pious devotee, Hanumān? That would **■** happen.”

Tearfully she thus invoked Lord Agni, the God of Fire, “Oh God Agni, you know this *vānara*, Rāma’s messenger. He is an uncompromising celibate, a faithful servant of his Lord, a helper of others in distress and **■** who has sworn his allegiance to Rāma. He has taken **■** oath to **■** it that I would rejoin my Lord Rāma in good time. He is prepared to sacrifice his everything for **■** noble cause.

*Yadyasti pūatiśuśrūṣā yadyasti caritam tapaḥ,
Yadi vāstyekapatnītvam, śīto bhava hanūmataḥ.*

“Oh Lord Agni, you know very well that I am a chaste **■**. If you are really convinced of my chastity, become cool to Hanumān. If you are really prepared to help him in going back to my husband, don’t burn away Hanumān’s tail. If I am really a lucky woman, let no harm **■** to Hanumān. If Sugrīva’s promise to Rāma should be made good, let nothing untoward occur to Hanumān. It is only Hanumān, the kind and noble servant of Rāma, that can take **■** back to my lord and master (Rāma). Oh, Lord Agni, if you have no mercy on me, burn me away but spare the faithful Hanumān.

Sītā’s beseeching words moved Agni’s heart. She felt that the Lord of Fire had taken pity on her. She also felt that the God of

Air, Lord Vāyu, sent ■ cool breeze towards her. That noble lady's heart ■ filled with ecstasy, for all this proved Hanumān was unhurt.

MARVEL

Hanumān looked ■ his tail. Eventhough the flames were touching the sky, he felt ■ pain. He thought: "Oh, ■ the God of Fire is lending help to Rāma. I don't feel even the slightest pain. What a wonder! Perhaps the blessings of Rāma and Sītā ■ coming to my rescue."

Just like mount Maināka, Lord Agni ■ also siding with Rāma, and he is the friend of the Lord of Air*. Perhaps because of their friendship is his concern for me.

Then Hanumān prayed to Agni thus: "Lord Agni, you ■ the bountiful ■ who comes to the aid of the needy. I shall always be grateful to you. My only aim is to hand Sītā back to Rāma. I thought it was but right that the City of Laṅkā should burn for Rāvaṇa's misdeeds. Therefore I am seeking your help." He felt Lord Agni agreed with his wish.

Making lion-like noise, Hanumān jumped upto the outer gate of Laṅkā. He spread out his limbs. All the ropes that tied him fell away. He pulled out the iron pillars supporting the gates, and had thrown them on the gate-keepers. At ■ stroke, they fell down on the earth. Hanumān's tail was burning with tremendous force. The flames were reaching upto the sky.

At last Hanumān's purpose of coming to Laṅkā was fulfilled. He thought his duty was done. He ■ the great city which excelled even the heavenly town of Amarāvati. Just like the sea ■ high tide, Hanumān's anger burst into uncontrollable wrath. Then he began to consider his next step: "I found the noble lady Sītā. I destroyed the Aśoka garden, which is so dear to Rāvaṇa. I killed many Rākṣasa heroes. I sent Akṣaya, the beloved ■ of Rāvaṇa to the kingdom of death. I gauged the strength and weakness, and the war preparations, of Rāvaṇa. I must now break up the strong

*Hanumān is the godson of Vāyu, the Lord of air.

towers of Rāvaṇa's fort. I must make of their splendid architecture an oblation to Lord Agni. Then only my trouble will have borne fruit. Oh what a fool Rāvaṇa is! He set my tail on fire. This indeed was a regrettable incident in the history of Laṅkā. I shall now make this a happy event and offer a feast to Lord Agni by burning all these edifices of Laṅkā. Then Rāvaṇa will have received his due punishment for his sins." Flying above the house-tops of Laṅkā, Hanumān looked like a dark cloud filled with lightnings. He was jumping from one palace to another. First he set Prahasta's palace on fire. Then the castles of Mahāpārśva, Vajradamshṭra, Sāraṇa, Indrajit, Jambumāli were made burnt offerings to Agni. He left only the abode of Vibhīṣaṇa unhurt, and proceeded to set fire to the buildings of Rāsmiketu, Sūryaśatru, Hrasvakarṇa, Daṁṣṭra, Romaśa, Dhvajagrīva, Vidayujjihva, Hastimukha, Karāḷa, Piśāca, Śonitākṣa, Makarākṣa, Kumbhakarṇa, Yajñaśatru, Brahmaśatru, Nikumbha and other Rākṣasa heroes.

From there Hanumān went to Rāvaṇa's haṛem and surrounded it with his fire. This beloved palace of Rāvaṇa which is built with alabaster, studded with gold, silver, diamonds, pearls and amethysts, at last became a mass of flame and the sparks were kissing the heavenly region. All the precious gates, towers, windows, thrones, pictures, and other valuable material were turned into bonfire.

Looking at this terrible sight, the Rākṣasa women, their husbands and their children began to cry wildly. Seeing the treasures gathered from generation to generation turned into useless dust and ashes, the citizens of Laṅkā were broken-hearted and fled hither and thither aimlessly. The children were crying for their mothers. The mothers were crying for the children. The relatives of the dead people were hitting their heads against the walls in their desperate bereavement. Eventhough numberless skulls of the Rākṣasas fell upon her, mother Earth was still unsatisfied. As the fat in the bodies of Rākṣasas burnt into oblatory fuel, the flames were increasingly hitting up to the skies. The flames took different shapes. At one corner, they looked like 'Moduga' * flames. At another like 'Buruga' * flames and the smoke from the flames spread on to the white clouds, darkening them.

* Varieties of trees

Hanumān looked around the city of Laṅkā. Wherever he went, he could hear the heart-rending cries of the Rākṣasas and he could see the sight of burning palaces. On whatever side he set his sight, only the picture of people shedding helpless tears, and sighing and weeping relentlessly, was presented before him. Whichever corner he turned to look at, he saw mounds of human corpses and carcasses of horses and elephants. Oh how inscrutable are the ways of the Lord! At last Rāvaṇa is getting his unhappy reward for his sin of stealing of another man's wife.

Praising Hanumān's valour, the citizens of Laṅkā were talking among themselves. "This monkey is not ordinary one. He might be the God of Death in disguise, or the anger of Brahmā might have taken this form of monkey; or it could be that the absolute supreme power of Lord Viṣṇu has assumed the shape of the monkey; or it could be that Lord Śiva has transferred his Doomsday figure to this monkey."

Seeing the terrible plight of the Laṅkā citizens Hanumān thought: "Rāvaṇa is about to fall into the pit he himself dug up. His valour, strength and splendour are now dying up in flames. Now the defeat of Rākṣasas is inevitable. I will soon bring here Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sugrīva. They will be mightily pleased to see the city of Laṅkā turned into a burial-ground. They will pat me on my back and then my life will be sanctified."

The tremendous force which could set the whole of Laṅkā on fire struck Rāvaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa in different ways.

Rāvaṇa thought: "Alas, how mysterious is the way of destiny! Has it been the degree of fate that a mere monkey should burn out this mighty city of Laṅkā? This vānara is no average monkey. Maybe the gods, demigods and angels of the high heaven sent him here to take revenge on me. What a fool I was! I made my men set fire to his tail and take him around the city of Laṅkā. I never thought that this monkey was such a supreme fighter and hero. Sugrīva is also another reputed hero. His brother Vāli once carried me in his arms and took me around the seven seas in a second. And Rāma who killed such a powerful Vāli must be really an invincible hero. Perhaps the tears of Sītā turned into these flames. He who is born must die. None can escape death. A hero must die

the hands of another hero on the battlefield. It is but right that I should now set aside all these timid thoughts and face up to Rāma. It befits my reputation."

Necessary arrangements were made to quench the flames. Then the news that Vibhīṣaṇa's buildings alone were left unhurt came to Rāvaṇa. He thought that this was an act of gratitude on the vānara's part.

WORRY

Hanumān went to the coast and immersed his burning tail in the waters. His anger was gone. He felt before his eyes the presence of the weeping Sītā sitting all alone under the Śimsūpa tree in the Aśoka garden. He was also moved to tears. He feared his act would be a possible danger to Sītā. He realized that just as fire must be conquered with water, so also must anger be subdued through good sense. Those who fall a prey to anger torture even good people with harsh words. They would stoop to all sorts of misdeeds. They would even go to the extent of killing their own parents. So he alone is a great man who can control his anger.

Repenting within himself, Hanumān thought: "Unthinkingly I have set Laṅkā on fire, I might have thereby spoilt the success of my Lord's mission. What could have happened to Sītā? I am afraid some danger must have already come to her. If, unfortunately, she was tortured by the Rākṣasas, I can no longer think of living. I must offer myself as an oblation to the God of Fire or become food for the sea creatures by drowning myself in this ocean. No. Why should I besmirch fire and water through my sinful body? That must not happen. I must find untodeath. Otherwise I will be called a traitor to my master. It is better to die than to live an infamous life. How can I face Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sugrīva? It would be to my discredit, if all my might could not save Sītā. Vanity got the better of my good sense. I forgot myself. Like a fool, I put my Lord's task in jeopardy.

Suddenly Hanumān's right eye and right shoulder trembled as a sign of good to come. Then he felt in his heart of hearts that nothing untoward happened to Sītā.

From the skies the angels, archangels and demi-gods spoke: "Hanumān's valour is marvellous. He had destroyed many mighty edifices. Even now the flames emerging from the burning buildings are reaching up to the sky. Rāvaṇa got what he asked for. Even his invincible fortress is now burning down into shreds of waste material. But the great ornament of her sex, the noble lady Sītā, is safe and sound under the Śimsūpa tree in the Aśoka garden. Lord Agni would always destroy the sinful, and spare the virtuous. He is now helping the divine Rāma in proper fashion. Oh Lord Agni, you have kept up your noble tradition. You have saved Mother Sītā. Now you may be sure of receiving more and more oblations from your devotees."

As soon as Hanumān heard these words, his whole frame was filled with rapture. Tears of joy fell from his eyes. His heart was fortified with ecstasy.

RE-VISIT

Hanumān went to Sītā again in the Aśoka garden. She was seated under the Śimsūpa tree. She was informed by the Rākṣasa women that Hanumān had burnt down the city of Laṅkā. Then she was anxious to see Hanumān again. Even as she thought so, Hanumān presented himself before her. He obediently saluted her. He was shedding tears of joy. So was Sītā. She was reassured that because Hanumān was safe and sound, he would be sure to get Rāma to take her back. As for Hanumān, he felt certain that since he succeeded in finding out where Sītā was, he would be in the good graces of Śrī Rāma.

Hanumān told Sītā, "Mother, forgive me for my thoughtless deeds. I learnt about your welfare through the gods in Heaven. I shall soon come back here along with Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Sugrīva and the monkey hordes. So bless me."

Sītā replied: "Oh Lord of the monkeys, your strength and heroism are laudable. I know, you by yourself can kill Rāvaṇa and his clan. But it is only right that my Lord should come here and put an end to Rāvaṇa and his kingdom with his mighty weapons. Rāvaṇa has at last learnt the ability of Rāma's messenger. Now he is sure to learn the greater might of Rāma himself. Besides, Śrī

Rāma should himself take me back to Ayodhyā. Hanumān, your loyalty and fidelity are incomparable. For our sake, you have put up with several insults and injuries. We shall always be grateful to you. I have nothing with me to repay your debt. When I rejoin my husband, I shall give you your due reward. Now I can only pray that the saviour of the world, the almighty God should always be your guardian. I also bless that your lord and master, Rāma, should give you the needed strength. Please convey my salutations to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Please beseech Rāma for me never to forget me. Tell him that I am alive only in the hope of seeing him again. I shall be eagerly awaiting the arrival of all of you." Hanumān took leave of her with his eyes wet with tears of sympathy and commiseration.

RETURN JOURNEY

Preparing to cross the sea again, Hanumān reached mount Ariṣṭa. As he was going back, Sītā kept on looking at him till he was out of sight, and when he was gone, she fainted.

As Hanumān reached the top of the mountain, he increased his stature and prayed to Rāma and Sītā. Immediately he felt that he was imbued with a divine power.

In order to cross the sea, Hanumān jumped up into the sky. As he took his stance, the mountain was somewhat crushed under his feet. Like the divine bird Garuḍa flying up to the moon, Hanumān sped through the sky. Playing hide-and-seek with the clouds, roaring like a lion, Hanumān passed over mount Maināka, thanking him for his former help.

When he reached the other side of the sea, he saluted mount Mahendra, which is on the coast. There, his fellow monkey heroes were gathered. Looking at them, Hanumān felt indescribable joy. Waving his tail this way and that, and again and again roaring like a lion, he expressed his ecstasy over getting back to his people.

GREAT JOY

The monkey hordes heard the cries of victory which rose from Hanumān. The happy Jāmbavān asked his fellow monkeys, "Are

you not able to hear Hanumān's lion-like cries? He is coming back in flying colours. Come. Let us bid him ■ hearty welcome."

Dancing with joy, the monkeys reached up to the mount Mahendra. They climbed up the gigantic trees. Just as the humans would greet ■ relation who visits them from overseas in spectacular fashion, so also the monkeys expressed their happiness by swinging the boughs of the trees. When Hanumān came into sight, they jumped with rapture. Hanumān in his turn was equally thrilled by the sight of his comrades, and shouted, "I have found Sītā. I have found Sītā." Those words fell on the ears of the vānaras like divine tidings.

The gods in heaven showered ■ rain of the flowers on them all. The monkey heroes bowed to Hanumān and embraced him in reverence. They presented him with sweet fruits. Hanumān thanked them all duly.

Aṅgada said to Hanumān, "Oh jewel of the monkey race, your valour is unrivalled. You crossed in ■ trice ■ mighty sea spanning a hundred miles. Your loyalty to your master is praiseworthy. You are the lucky person who could first see mother Sītā with your own eyes. Today we are highly proud of you, because we belong to your race. This land of Kīśkindhā is really ■ diamond-mine because it gave birth to ■ heroic son like you. You have driven away the sorrow in Rāma's heart caused by the absence of Sītā. How fortunate we are to be your contemporaries!" Hanumān again expressed his gratitude to them and seated himself on a big stone. The monkey heroes gathered around him and pressed him with many anxious and inquisitive queries. They were all agog to hear the news of his exploits.

PAST STORY

Hanumān began to narrate all the incidents that happened since he left mount Mahendra.

"Rāvaṇa is adept in the worship of Lord Śiva. By virtue of his penance, he is capable of destroying the three worlds. But since he abducted Sītā Devī, the power of his penance was gone. The Lord of Death is ready to take him away. We are merely instruments in helping the God of Death, Yama. I am capable of nullifying the

force of any ferocious weapon of the Rākṣasas. Among the Rākṣasas there are none who ■■■ match the skill of our Jāmbavan, Aṅgada and other heroes. Aṅgada is well-versed in war-craft. He is a mighty hero. Similarly, our Panasa and Nīla, are also capable of tearing into pieces the Rākṣasas. Our Mainda and Dvīvida ■■■ offspring of the divine Asvini Devatas. They have drunk of ambrosia and received blessings from Brahmā that they would be immortal.

I alone made a sacrifice of the city of Laṅkā to Lord Agni, the God of Fire. I warned them that the invisible and redoubtable heroes, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa and Sugrīva, would not leave the citizens of Laṅkā unpunished.

Like the study of Śāstras on an inauspicious day, Sītā, because of her separation from her husband, has become emaciated. Like Śacī Devī, who refused the cruel designs of Nahuṣa on her, and devoted her thoughts to her Lord Purandara, Sītā has been concentrating her mind only on her Lord Rāma. She has not yet changed the sari which she wore on the day she was abducted. She is capable of destroying the kingdom of Laṅkā by virtue of her powers of chastity. But in order that the fame of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa might not be besmirched, she left Rāvaṇa uncursed. It is our bounden duty to help Rāma. Our chief objective should be the reunion of Sītā and Rāma. For that purpose we should be prepared to go through any amount of trouble and make any kind of sacrifice. Among you, there are many aged intellectuals and intellectual giants. Rāvaṇa must be given proper punishment. Please consider what is the best thing to be done."

Aṅgada told the fellow monkeys, "Our immediate task is to offer Sītā Devī to the divine Śrī Rāma. We must at once start for the city of Laṅkā. Hanumān was already telling us that he has burnt away that great city. There may not be any one left who can obstruct us there.

Jāmbavān told after a little consideration, "Oh Vānara heroes, Aṅgada's words sound very wise. We must not behave ■■■ we like. First it is proper that we should consult Rāma himself."

Thereupon Hanumān proceeded to meet Lord Rāma, followed by the other monkey heroes. They, too, in following him,

felt that they themselves have achieved Rāma's errand. What greater present could they offer to Śrī Rāma than the news of Sītā's safety? They are all prepared to lay down their lives for this great reunion of Sītā and Rāma. So they all hurried with enthusiasm and ebullience to Rāma to give him the glad tidings and to promise him their utmost help.

DESTRUCTION OF MADHU GARDEN

On the way, the monkey army passed through Madhu garden. Without the orders of Sugrīva, even ■ small ant cannot get into that garden. It is kept in good order under the surveillance of Sugrīva's uncle, Dadhimukha.

This Madhu garden was presented to the rulers of Kiṣkindhā Kingdom by Brahmā as ■ form of blessing. It is full of saplings and trees of various kinds. There the monkeys saw bees which, thanks to their eating several juicy fruits, produced much honey in their hives. The monkeys asked Aṅgada's permission to drink the honey. He could not refuse their request. He persuaded the elders and obtained the permission to enter the garden. Aṅgada was quite aware of the fact that Sugrīva has great regard and affection for him, and that he would be never be angry with him. Besides, they were all going to convey the good news of Sītā's whereabouts to Śrī Rāma. So he thought Sugrīva would only be too pleased to let his monkey hordes drink the honey and eat the fruits in the Madhu garden. Then, thanking Aṅgada for his kind gesture, the monkeys entered the Madhu garden in high spirits.

The monkeys are by nature of a fickle temperament. After drinking the honey they forgot themselves, and singing and dancing and embracing one another, later they started quarrelling among themselves. Honey and wine make of man ■ beast by their bad effects. It is no wonder that they turned the naturally wayward monkeys into ill-behaving creatures. In their intoxication they broke up all the boughs in the trees and plucked away all the flowers and even rooted out many trees. Seeing the carnage, Dadhimukha tried his best to restrain them. He lost his temper, and abused the monkeys, persuading some of them and beating up some others. Thereupon the monkeys got wild and scratched and

smote and kicked Dadhimukha. They did not leave even a drop of the intoxicating honey undrunk.

Hanumān saw this terrible sight. Perhaps because of his enthusiasm resulting from his victory, earlier he told the indisciplined monkeys, "Comrades, drink your fill of all the honey you can get here. If anybody comes in your way, I shall protect you from him."

Hanumān was aware that Sugrīva would never go against the wishes of his soldiers. So it was only to encourage the monkey hordes that Hanumān spoke in that manner. It was also his wish to cheer them up in preparation for their coming fight on behalf of Rāma.

Hearing Hanumān's words, Aṅgada was delighted. He had complete faith in Hanumān's presence of mind and sense of proportion. So he supported Hanumān.

But the situation got out of hand. Most of the monkeys got too drunk and fell into a drunken sleep.

Then Dadhimukha ordered his followers thus: "Let these fellows lie down here. Go and tell Sugrīva all that has happened. If Sugrīva learns that Aṅgada was behind all this nuisance he would punish him. Actually, even if Aṅgada is tortured and killed, he would get only what he deserves."

Dadhimukha also followed his soldiers and joined them on mount Prasravaṇa. There they met Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sugrīva, and saluted them with reverence.

Sugrīva asked Dadhimukha, "Oh hero, what is all this? You are older than I. You are dear to me and are my own uncle. I see you grieving. Now, get up. I give you my promise of helping you. Tell me the reason for your grief."

Dadhimukha replied "Lord, although I am older than you, you are the ruler and I am your subject. I live in obedience to you. Now it is my sad duty to inform you that the beloved Madhu garden which has been nourished through the ages by the lords of Kiṣkindhā has now been destroyed mercilessly by the monkey

hordes under Aṅgada's orders. They not only insulted me but also injured my watchman and hung them up on the trees. I need not tell you that this is treason. I cannot understand what made Aṅgada and his followers rebel in this way." Sugriva's face assumed a cheerful aspect. Instead of anger there was to be found in it joy. Tears of ecstasy fell down his eyes. Lakṣmaṇa saw this all with wonder. He asked Sugriva what was the reason behind the misdeeds of Aṅgada and his followers.

Sugriva answered, "The history of Madhu garden is well-known. It has been presented to my ancestors by Brahmā. It is very dear to me. But the monkeys who entered it are loyal and wise folks. From this it is to be gauged that they were celebrating the fact of finding Sītā's whereabouts. In the happiness resulting from their great discovery, they must have drunk up all the honey and wine there. Then they must have lost their senses and destroyed the garden. Aṅgada could not help the destruction which resulted from the high spirits in which his followers found themselves. This Dadhimukha is an old fool. As he and his followers obstructed the monkeys in their celebration the latter must have given them a good hiding."

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa heard these words in great joy. Their main concern was with the safety of Sītā. They were desirous of seeing her with their own eyes. So was Sugriva.

Then Sugriva told Dadhimukha, "I am now sure that Hanumān has come back a victor. Please don't worry about the fact that the Madhu garden has been destroyed. We can grow up any number of Madhu gardens. If they had not found Sītā's whereabouts they would not have resorted to such indiscipline. What better reward can we offer these successful monkeys than pleasing their tastes? They have every right to drink the honey and eat the fruits there. Hanumān and Jāmbavān know all about my nature and inclinations. The Madhu garden does not belong to me alone. It belongs to all the people of Kiṣkindhā kingdom. The destruction of Madhu garden was the result of their high spirits and adventurous celebration. If you had only understood this fact you would not have obstructed them. Forget what was past and bring them over here."

Dadhimukha returned to Aṅgada and said "Please forgive me. Sugrīva was not angry at the news of the destruction of Madhu garden. On the contrary, he is very anxious to see you all. He asked me to escort you all to Kiṣkindhā. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa also are looking forward to your arrival.

Delighted with the generosity of Sugrīva, Aṅgada told his friends, "We must hurry up and inform Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sugrīva of the good news brought by Hanumān. Rāma's heart was broken because of his separation from Sītā. We must patch it up with the happy news of Sītā's safety. It is not right that we must delay a second now. Come. Let us hurry up."

As Hanumān and Aṅgada preceeded them, roaring like lions, all the monkeys started towards where Sugrīva, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were seated.

Before they arrived there, Rāma's face wore a sad look.

He was afraid of the possible bad news that he might have to hear. Then Sugrīva told Rāma, "Lord, had not the monkey hordes who went in searching Sītā succeeded in their efforts, they would not have come back to us. They would not have entered the Madhu Garden and destroyed it, if they were not successful in their mission. I am convinced that Sītā is safe and sound. Would not your blessings have their reward? And would not the mission which has Aṅgada as Commander-in-chief, Jāmbavān as the Minister, and Hanumān as its main messenger, succeed?" Just as he was thus convincing Rāma, he heard the cries of the approaching monkeys. His joy knew no bounds.

Aṅgada, Jāmbavān, Hanumān and the rest of the monkeys saw the three personages. Hanumān's body rapturously trembled. Tears of joy fell from his eyes. Judging from his features, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa realized that his errand had come to a fruitful end. Hanumān proceeded towards them with folded hands. Rāma welcomed them with outstretched arms.

GOOD NEWS

Hanumān fell prostrate at Rāma's feet and submitted to him this message: "I found Sītā in Rāvaṇa's Aśoka garden. She is shining in all the glory of her divine powers and supreme chastity.

*Dṛṣṭā devī'ti hanumad vadanāt amṛtopamaṃ,
Ākarnya vacanam rāmo haṣamāpa salakṣmaṇaḥ.*

Śrī Rāma was extremely delighted at the [] and embraced Hanumān in joy. By virtue of Śrī Rāma's touch, Hanumān felt that he has attained supreme bliss. As for Lakṣmaṇa, no words can describe his satisfaction.

Lakṣmaṇa thought: "Oh how great is Hanumān's loyalty! And how admirably, helpful are these vānaras! Really, this great Hanumān who has again lit the flame of joy in Rāma's heart is ■ blessed person. Let this person's fame be broadcast all over the universe! Indeed, the word 'messenger' can be aptly applied to Hanumān alone. And how powerful is Śrī Rāma's divine grace which ■ attract such a worthy follower! Very few are such selfless devotees in this world. The presiding deity of this Kiṣkindhā kingdom is thrice blessed in bringing forth such worthy children. Now the dark clouds covering the brightness of Ikṣāvāku dynasty are dispersed. The old saying, 'joy and grief ■ like light and shade, they follow each other like the night follows the day,' is undeniably true." Sugrīva in his happy condition thought: Hanumān who could achieve Rāma's love and affection has sanctified himself. Thanks to this mighty vānara, our kingdom of Kiṣkindhā has achieved deathless renown. He is now shining like ■ supreme diamond among his entire race. How can ■ repay his debt? In fact, this person ■ born with a divine mission in life. Now it is upto us to kill Rāvaṇa and bring back Sītā to Śrī Rāma."

On hearing Hanumān's ambrosial words, Rāma's joy was redoubled. Old memories came back to him. He told Hanumān "Friend, your fidelity is exemplary. How merciful is the divine providence which granted ■ a friend like you. You ■ the pious person who provided peace of mind for me. How can I ever thank you sufficiently? I have nothing with ■ to offer you in gratitude. So I am offering myself as ■ present to you. Now please tell ■ in detail the news about Sītā."

Hanumān's heart was filled with supreme satisfaction. He has obtained the love and friendship of Rāma. His master has become his own. What else does he want? That great personage whose presence was prayed for by millions of devotees has now become his own. Yes, Hanumān, who could call Rāma his pious property, is the most fortunate among living creatures.

Hanumān turned southwards, prayed to Sītā inwardly, and told Rāma: "Lord, I am a blessed soul. Thanks to your blessings, I crossed the hundred knots across the sea in a trice. Entering the city of Laṅkā, I searched Rāvaṇa's harem. I could not find Sītā there. I lamented for a while. Then by the grace of God my sight fell on the Aśoka garden. Going there, I saw Sītā sitting under the śimsupa tree. She was sitting on the hard earth. Her plaits were dishevelled. Her body was emaciated. She was all the time muttering your name in prayer. Her only solace is your name. As she heard me narrating your story faithfully, she believed me. She said it was a good thing that you made friends with Sugrīva. Her devotion and dedication to you are unparalleled. She reminded herself of the past incidents in your company. She told me all about the episode of Kākāśura and the anecdote of your painting a beauty spot on her cheek when the sacred dot on her forehead was wiped away.

*Eṣa cūḍāmaṇiḥ śrīman mayā suparirakṣitaḥ,
Manah śilayāl tilako gaṇḍa pārśve niveśitaḥ.*

She always looks at you in her Cūḍāmaṇi. She is alive merely in the hope of rejoining you. There is only one month for her to live in Laṅkā. Rāvaṇa threatened to kill her after that period. She did not accede to my proposal that I myself kill Rāvaṇa and carry her here. It was her idea that such a step would blemish your name. She is now determined to see you turning Laṅkā city into ashes through your divine weapons. I promised her that I would escort you back to Laṅkā. Oh Lord, long ago I placed you on the pedestal of my-heart. But for your divine blessings, I could not have achieved success in this hard task: Now reassure me that you will always stay in my heart's abode. Here is the Cūḍāmaṇi that Sītā handed to me to be given to you. Kindly accept it."

Rāma took the Cūḍāmaṇi and caressingly pressed it against his heart. His eyes were wet with unshed tears. That Cūḍāmaṇi

■ as offered to King Janaka as ■ reward for his sacrificial Yajña by Devendra. The precious gems with which it was studded came out of the mighty ocean. The rays spreading out of the gems have been giving Sītā a godly grace. Looking at this Cūḍāmaṇi, Rāma was reminded of his father Daśaratha, King Janaka and Sītā herself.

Seeing Rāma's nostalgic agony, the very gems in the Cūḍāmaṇi appeared to melt. Rāma could see Sītā's image in the Cūḍāmaṇi. He felt Sītā was thus addressing him "Lord, I ■ alive, with my last breath, in the hope of seeing you again. Can, ever the love-birds (Cakravāka pair) live separated from each other? What use have I for my eyes which cannot enjoy the sight of your magnetic personality? What use have I for the hands which cannot serve your needs? Rāvaṇa gave me only one more month to accept his designs on me or else to perish. After the deadline, he would cut ■ into pieces and eat me ■ his breakfast. I know you who killed Vāli would easily conquer Rāvaṇa. Hanumān who burned the city of Laṅkā is now a nightmare to its surviving citizens. My sole aim in life is to catch ■ final glimpse of you, if I may have to die here. Won't you please accede to my request?"

Hearing this supplication, Rāma shed tears and cried, "Oh Sītā, how can I ever live without you? Here I am coming to you." Suddenly Sītā disappeared before his vision.

Seeing Rāma's plight, Lakṣmaṇa, Sugrīva and Hanumān consoled him. They prayed to God, that Rāma would meet with success. Then Rāma ordered Sugrīva to get ready to leave for Laṅkā. On hearing that command, the joy of the vānara heroes knew no bounds. They shouted in ecstasy. "Long live Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa! Long live Sugrīva! Long live Hanumān and may Hanumān's fame spread all over the universe, for he brought glory to our race!"

At that very moment, Sītā in the Aśoka garden felt certain good omens. She was divinely ecstatic. Having heard the good news of Rāma's safety from Hanumān, and having experienced these signs of coming good fortune, she realized supreme self-confidence and beatific peace of mind.

YUDDHA KĀṆḌA

Rāma told the monkey-hordes who came to him with triumphant jubilation: "Friends, I am grateful to you for your selfless service and devotion. Your comrade and leader Hanumān is the greatest illustration of what a messenger should be.

"You know that the great messenger is he who not only conveys the message but also uses his own intelligence and initiative in the negotiations. The mediocre messenger is he who is capable of doing better but is content with just delivering the message of his lord. The worst messenger is he who is capable but yet fails to do his master's bidding in the right manner. Hanumān belongs to the first class. He put up with discomfort and disgrace; never lost his nerve; did not flinch from the highest sacrifice. In at last contacting Sītā he had not merely fulfilled his mission but even rescued the reputation of our clan. For our race would have been the butt of history's ridicule if we did not rescue Sītā and save her from the threatened persecution by Rāvaṇa. Indeed, the Nemesis that was about to strike at our race was driven away by Hanumān's efforts. I can only embrace him fondly as a token of my gratitude to him."

Rāma followed his words with appropriate action. Enraptured at finding himself in the arms of his Lord, Hanumān told himself that Rāma's affection was all that he cared for. The greatest reward in life for him was to be able to serve Rāma. Hanumān felt that the soul-power of Rāma was transmitted to him. An unbreakable bond was forged between them. Surely the world cannot look for a greater master than Rāma and a greater servant than Hanumān. As for Sugrīva, he is the ideal friend.

Rāma turned to Sugrīva and others, and asked: "By God's grace and Hanumān's help we know where Sītā is. It remains for us to cross the sea and set her free. I ask you whether it is possible to cross this mighty water barrier."

Sugrīva replied: "Lord, you are known to be the greatest of heroes; the wisest of philosophers; the embodiment of *Dharma*. Is

it right that you should entertain the least little doubt about our further course of action. All of us are prepared to lay down our lives in your service. Our determination and dedication are quite equal to the task. Once we build a bridge across the sea, the rest is well-assured. When we reach Laṅkā, your prowess and our help will see the end of Rāvaṇa and his people. Kindly encourage ■ and do not entertain any doubts.”

Of course Rāma himself knew that he could use one of the charmed weapons Viśvāmitra gave him and cause the ocean to dry up. He actually felt the inanimate weapons in his quiver speaking up to him to make use of their particular powers—the *Āgneya* missile seemed to say that it would burn up the sea; the *Vāyavya* that it would wipe away the whole kingdom of Rāvaṇa; the *Vārūṇa* that it would submerge Laṅkā; the *Brāhma* that it would lasso and tie up the whole Rākṣasa race; the other weapons too joined in similar vibratory messages. They all in one voice seemed to say that their sole aim was to be instrumental in bringing Rāma and Sītā together.

Rāma ■■ thrilled by the unspoken message of his weapons. He silently promised them that they would be used at the right time and place. The weapons then seemed to feel extremely gratified.

Then Rāma turned to Hanumān: “I have the power of penance and the weapons to build a bridge across the sea or even to cause it to dry up. But I do not want to show off my strength when normal means are available. You are the one who saw Sītā and detected the state of Rāvaṇa’s armed forces. I seek your counsel.”

Hanumān ■■ pleased with Rāma’s sagacity and simplicity, and was impressed by his enthusiasm and determination. He replied: “Lord, I understand your position and I appreciate your confidence in me. Let ■■ inform you in detail about the strategic positions. The city of Laṅkā is situated ■■ mount Trikūṭa and is surrounded by forts on all four sides. Around the town flow rivers. Thus the city enjoys ■ natural bastion. There are ■■ boats or ships ■■ take ■■ there from beyond the seas. The people lead an insular life, resting assured about their invulnerability. In fact it is the

home of heroes. Rāvaṇa is ■ mighty leader and warrior. He, by precept and example, evokes the best out of them. At the four gates leading into the town ferocious Rākṣasas stand guard.

“Lord, I told you these facts because we must know the foes’ strength before launching an attack. They are not invincible, though I myself have been able to kill several of those Rākṣasa heroes and I have burnt much of the Laṅkā town. I assure you that it is possible to build ■ bridge across the ocean. Aṅgada, Dvivida, Mainda, Panasa, Jāmbavān and the commander-in-chief Nīla are all capable of destroying the kingdom of Laṅkā. Please instruct Aṅgada to make the necessary arrangements. Let us start our journey ■■ ■■ auspicious day.”

DECISION

Rāma told Hanumān: “You spoke well. I will surely kill Rāvaṇa. There! The sun-god is right above our head. The astrologers say that this is the right moment to go ■■ ■ journey.”

Then he turned to Sugrīva and said: “Friend, today the star, *Uttara Phalguni*, is ruling in the sky. This is in concord with my birth-star, *Punarvasu*. Besides, my right eye is throbbing. All these are happy signs. Let ■■ rightaway start ■■ our mission of recovering Sītā and punishing Rāvaṇa.

Please ask Nīla to lead the army along fertile tracks where ■■ find food and drink without difficulty. We must also beware of sudden attacks from the enemy lying in wait in dark valleys. We ■■ setting about a difficult task. Let us leave behind the weaklings. Let the mighty heroes Gaja, Gavaya and Gavākṣa lead the way in the front; let Vṛṣabha walk ■■ the right side and Gandhamādana ■■ the left. I shall be seated ■■ Hanumān’s shoulders, and, marching in the middle, shall cheer up the army all around. Lakṣmaṇa will be seated on Aṅgada’s shoulders and will be right behind ■■. Jāmbavān, Suśeṇa and Vegadarśī will bring up the rear and ■■ that nothing untoward happens to us suddenly from behind. Surely, success is ours.”

Accordingly, everyone took up his position, all the while shouting “Hail Rāma.”

Hanumān was inexpressibly pleased, for he saw that the work he initiated was soon going to bear fruit, and his Lord and master, whom he long ago enthroned in his heart, is now in person seated on his shoulders.

Lakṣmaṇa's whole aim in life was to adore and protect Rāma and Sītā. So he prayed to God that they would soon be brought together.

Sugrīva was immensely grateful to Rāma for restoring his wife and his kingdom to him. Knowing the pangs of separation from the beloved, from his own experience, he fully sympathised with Rāma and prayed for the success of the latter's efforts.

RAYS OF HOPE

At about this time Sītā in the Aśoka garden felt her left eye throbbing. She saw the divine eagle, Garuḍa, flying in the skies singing encouraging songs. All this gave her new hope. As she was then reminded of her husband, and consequently found herself in great distress, she saw before her mind's eye Hanumān reverentially reassuring her: "Mother, please accept my humble salutation. As soon as Rāma and others heard the news of you from me, they left for here. Please rest assured that you will soon be free and reunited with your Lord." Sītā shed tears of joy, and mentally thanked God for providing them with such a friendly messenger and devoted servant.

Here the monkey hordes were proceeding southwards with tremendous vigour and clamour. Mother Earth seemed to be trembling under the pressure of their feet, but she did not at all mind because they were going to rescue her own child, Sītā.

After a while they reached the region of Sahya and Malaya hills. There they feasted on the plentiful food and drink the welcoming Nature offered them. Proceeding further, they arrived at mount Mahendra from where Hanumān flew across the ocean.

Rāma and party surveyed the distance across the sea from the top of that mountain. Rāma thought that first they should

propitiate the sea-god, and was cogitating the best way of doing so. The rest of the party rested themselves at various congenial places.

After finishing their evening prayers, Lakṣmaṇa told Rāma: "Soon you will be seeing Sītā Devī, after gaining victory over Rāvaṇa. All around happy are to be seen. The air-god is blowing refreshing winds. The evening star is glowing brightly. So the seven sages in the constellation of Taurus. Our forefather Triśaṅku is sparkling in the company of the star named after Vasiṣṭha. The star sacred to our clan, Viśākhā, is shining with divine splendour. Terrified by its blaze, the star sacred to the Rākṣasas, Mūla, and the surrounding comet, able to give out only a faint shimmer. As I look at these enthusiastic soldiers, I am reminded of the army of demigods who fought with the monster Tāraka. All this is a matter for gratification. Please be sure of your victory and assure us of it."

POWWOW

In Rāvaṇa's court the king and his counsellors assembled for an emergency meeting. Rāvaṇa's visage was care-worn and pale. He told the courtiers: "You all know how a monkey entered our city, learnt the whereabouts of Sītā, burnt part of the town and killed several of our heroes. I wonder how many more such heroes in Sugrīva's army. The time has come for us to be prepared for the attack from Rāma, and his valorous monkey army.

"You all wise statesmen, endowed with foresight. I do not have to tell you how success in war is achieved by careful preplanning. Among the kings there are three kinds. The best are those who not only know their own good but are also aware of the good of the people, who listen to the wise counsels of the selfless ministers, and who set about their tasks with implicit faith in God. The mediocre ones are those who rely only on their own counsels, but act according to law. The worst are those who do not believe in God, do not pay heed to their ministers and do not act in accordance with accepted principles of statemanship. Similarly, the ranks of ministers also have these three types. Unanimity is the best form of ministerial counsel; opportunism is the second-rate; mutual discord is the third-rate.

"I appeal to you to advise in the best tradition, keeping in mind the strength of Rāma and his followers."

The courtiers were puzzled. Rāvaṇa had always been sure of himself; he never feared even the demigods. It was now strange that he should nervously seek their counsel.

BOASTFUL WORDS

Despite Rāvaṇa's wise admonition, his courtiers began to speak with vain assurance: "Lord, you have in your armoury many invincible weapons. You were able to befriend Lord Śiva, to gain the airplane Puṣpaka from the god of wealth, Kubera, and to win the hand of the daughter of the divine architect Maya, Maṇḍodarī, by your great valour. Even in the nether world you have subdued the serpent kings Vāsuki, Takṣaka, and Śaṅkhu; you have conquered Kālakeya and others who obtained boons from Brahmā. And the lord of hell, Yama, we are told, is afraid of you. So why should you fear the mere mortals, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa?

"Lord, your son Indrajit has vanquished the king of gods, Indra, and even carried him down here. At the request of Brahmā, you were magnanimous enough to let him go free. Surely, your ~~own~~ alone ~~can~~ defeat Rāma and his followers. We understand your worry over the destruction caused by that monkey Hanumān. We may dismiss his act as a ~~monkey~~ prank, natural to his race. He will not be so successful against our united effort. Indrajit, Prahasta, Durmukha, Vajradamṣṭra, Nikumbha, Rabhasa and Mahāpārśva, in our army, are capable of subduing both the brothers and the monkey army."

Vibhīṣana, the wise brother of Rāvaṇa, said: "Brother, we may resort to violence, if we fail in coming to an understanding with Rāma through goodness, charity and strategy. Violence works only against fools and villains, children and dolts.

"And you, Rākṣasa heroes, be advised that your words are mere boasts. There is no power on earth which ~~can~~ put down Rāma. Rāvaṇa made a mistake in abducting that great hero's noble wife. He will have to pay for his folly. The only way of

escaping Rāma's wrath is to return his beloved spouse to him and seek his forgiveness. That way Rāvaṇa can save the entire Rākṣasa race, and in the process win eternal fame as one who realized his folly in time."

The words of his brother set Rāvaṇa thinking. He retired to his private quarters to consider them.

As for Vibhīṣaṇa, he was not yet sure his wise counsel would prevail. He spent a restless night. He felt that the titular deity of the Laṅkā kingdom appeared before him tearfully, seeking his help for the doomed people. He promised her that he would do his best to save them. As the deity withdrew, he saw before his mind's eye Sītā Devī, sobbing inconsolably. The sympathetic Vibhīṣaṇa assured her that her tears would soon destroy Rāvaṇa and his kingdom and that his firm intention was to restore her to her Lord Rāma.

As he opened his eyes there was none before him. He somehow managed to spend the rest of the night, and waking up early in the morning went up to Rāvaṇa's palace.

There Rāvaṇa was found in a very ugly mood. His face betrayed uncontrollable wrath. He commissioned the priests to recite Vedic hymns to propitiate the gods in his favour in his battle against Rāma.

ADVICE

Realizing that his last counsel had yet had no good effect on Rāvaṇa, Vibhīṣaṇa reiterated: "Brother, you must have noticed how bad omens have been appearing ever since Sītā Devī was brought here. The sacrificial fire is covered with smoke and does not rise in flames; in the temples and the religious institutions poisonous serpents are roaming; ants are eating away the oblations; the holy cows are not yielding milk; elephants, horses and camels are unable to fulfil their natural functions; the specifics given by our medicine men are not effective; crows, owls and vultures are shouting their ominous cries on our housetops; dogs, foxes and wild animals are wandering unchecked, making ferocious noises.

“Sir, you have already seen how Hanumān had burnt our town. Do you want to see it completely destroyed, along with its people? It is not too late even ~~now~~ to make amends for your folly. I am not asking you to do anything for my sake. It is only in your interest I am speaking. Of course, you yourself know what is right and what is wrong. Your lustful obsession has blinded you to truth and justice. Please do not let such transitory craving ruin you and your entire race.”

Rāvaṇa's anger became greater. Really, giving advice to a wicked person is like feeding a poisonous snake with milk (which only increases its poison). He retorted: “Vibhīṣaṇa, I never thought you would speak such dastardly nonsense. I can't even dream of returning Sitā to Rāma. Not only monkeys, even if all the gods in heaven help Rāma, he cannot conquer me. Mind your business!”

Then Rāvaṇa left his palace and drove to the court in his golden chariot. Vibhīṣaṇa obediently followed him. The court was filled with Kumbhakarna, Prahasta, Śuka and other mighty Rākṣasa heroes and lords. Rāvaṇa called upon Prahasta to make all arrangements for the defence of the city.

Turning to the court in general he addressed: “Friends and comrades, I welcome you all and seek your counsel and help. ~~I see~~ that my brother Kumbhakarna has brought special glory to the assembly by attending it after ~~an~~ uninterrupted sleep of six months.

“Now, you know all about my fetching the beautiful Sitā here. She asked me to grant her a year's time to consider my offer of marrying her. She perhaps hopes that in the meantime her husband will come and rescue her. As I want to win her favours through polite means, I accepted her conditions.

“As regards Rāma's projected attack on us, I have always been under the impression that these mortals can't reach this island. But now, a ~~mere~~ monkey has somehow crossed the sea and hurt our pride. We must be prepared for ~~all~~ eventualities. ~~Rāma~~ has done incalculable harm to ~~our race~~ by offending Śūrpaṇakhā and by killing several of ~~our~~ friends and relatives ~~in~~ the Janasthāna forest.

“With your help I ~~once~~ conquered the demigods. Now I hope to have it again to meet the present crisis.”

KUMBHAKARṆA

Kumbhakarṇa is a sagacious person. He realized his brother's folly in craving the noble Sītā's company, but his natural affection for ~~his~~ brother outweighed his moral judgment. Perhaps this, too, was preordained by Fate.

Kumbhakarṇa told Rāvaṇa: “Brother, what you have already done was done. You have lent yourself to the whims of individual pleasure without due consideration of your public duty. However, it is too late to consider the rightness and wrongness of your action. I ~~shall~~ help you as much as I can. I don't think the monkey hordes are ~~a~~ match for me. I will surely devour them all.”

Although Rāvaṇa was pleased with Kumbhakarṇa's words, ~~he~~ took exception to the latter's moralising and patronising tones. He was about to reprimand him, when Mahāpārśva interceded on Kumbhakarṇa's behalf: “Lord, your brother spoke like that only to reassure you that you could keep ~~Sītā~~ whom you have managed to abduct here through powerful strategy. You surely are undefeatable in war. We will ~~all~~ stand by you. We are not cowards to accept Vibhīṣaṇa's counsel of seeking ~~a~~ compromise with Rāma. We will fight with him ~~as~~ befitting heroes.”

These words, which ~~impressed~~ Rāvaṇa, struck Vibhīṣaṇa like an ~~arrow~~.

STORY OF A CURSE

The gratified Rāvaṇa replied to Mahāpārśva: “Your words are worthy of ~~a~~ hero like you. Let me now tell you an old incident.

“Once on my visit to the heavenly kingdom I saw a lovely fairy named Puñjikasthala. I ~~fell~~ in love with her ~~and~~ wanted her to join me. ~~She~~ is a virtuous lady, ~~and she~~ thwarted my wishes. I then tried to ~~take~~ her by force. She somehow escaped my clutches and ran up to Brahmā. The god was ~~angry~~ at my act ~~and~~ cursed me ~~that~~

my head would break into pieces if I ever again tried to seek the favours of other's wives, against their will. Since then, I have been enjoying only the company of willing women. I have not assaulted **any** for fear of Brahma's curse. Otherwise, I have nothing to fear from Rāma and his friends. In fact Rāma is foolish in waging war against me. He is not really **awake** of all my powers and my powerful weapons which subdued **even** the gods in heaven."

The courtiers applauded Rāvaṇa's Boast with the exception of Vibhīṣaṇa. He thought it was his duty not to flinch from speaking out the truth, even if his advice would anger Rāvaṇa.

ADMONITION

"Brother, you **seem** to think that Sitā Devī is an ordinary mortal. To you she will prove to be **a** destructive serpent whose very sorrow will turn out to be the poisonous bite that will kill you. I want to repeat that the monkeys will tear you and your army into pieces, even if you survive the mighty onslaught of the heroic **Rāma** and Lakṣmaṇa. I once again advise you to restore **her** to Rāma and seek peace."

Turning to Prahasta, he said: "Friend, don't think that you and your army can withstand the might of Rāma whose charmed weapons will pierce you even if you try to hide yourself in the skies above or in the layers of the earth below. Please be warned and do not encourage Rāvaṇa in this foolish business.

Prahasta replied that they would rather die like heroes than surrender to Rāma. When Vibhīṣaṇa tried to admonish Prahasta further, Rāvaṇa's eldest **son** Indrajit stepped in and said: "Uncle, your words are an affront to our valour and prestige. For **a** Rākṣasa to sing the praises of ordinary **men** like Rāma in the very presence of Rāvaṇa, is an unforgivable action. You are indeed **a** blot **on** our race's escutcheon. You know very well that I, who subdued even the king of gods, Indra, alone, **am** capable of conquering Rāma and his army. Please put an end to your cowardly advice."

The pained Vibhīṣaṇa replied: "Boy, you are young and inexperienced. It is **a** pity that you have been brought to this court where only wise men should **find** place. However, I must tell you

that none of you has the power to resist Rāma's divinely charmed weapons. I am only trying to save you before it is too late."

To Rāvaṇa he made his last fervent appeal: "Please believe me. If you want to save yourself and your people, there is no alternative other than restoring Sītā Devī to Rāma and seeking his forgiveness. He is magnanimous by nature and he will forgive you."

BANISHMENT

All the wisdom of Vibhīṣaṇa's forethought and forewarning was in vain, as it fell on ears deafened by passion and prejudice.

Rāvaṇa replied bitterly: "It is possible to move among poisonous snakes and even to forgive one's worst enemies. But someone like you, who disdains his own kith and kin and admires the outsiders—he must not be befriended; he should be shunned and banished.

"You are only proving the sayings of wise men who maintain that the less lucky people always try to bring down their better-off relatives. Perhaps you know the verses spoken by the mythical elephants who were attacked by humans in the Padmaka forest. Here is one of them:

*Vidyate goṣu sampannam vidyate brāhmaṇe damaḥ,
Vidyate strīṣu cāpalyam vidyate jñātito bhayaṃ.*

Just as good cows yield rich milk, worthy Brahmins possess the virtue of self-control, and women are as a rule fickle, so is a poor relation full of envy and must be feared by the lucky people.

"I took you for a wise man. I never thought you would be jealous. You have enjoyed every pleasure and privilege under my care; now you are ungratefully rebelling against me. I have had enough of you and your insolence. If you want to live on, get out of this kingdom and let me not see your face any more."

Vibhīṣaṇa did his duty and realized that to pursue in the matter would not only be in vain but also positively foolish. His feelings were hurt, though he was still unvengeful towards his brother. He said: "Brother, you are my elder. I do not want to reply you in your own language. I only want to say that you

misunderstood me, because of my plain speaking. Honey-tongued counsels are easy to give: but it is hard to find a wise counsellor and a wise listener. Anyway, the time has come for the destruction of our race through you. I do not want to witness that scene. I shall take myself away from your presence, as you wished."

FAREWELL

Vibhīṣaṇa took four of his trusted friends with him, and before flying along with them up to the higher regions, he bade farewell to the city of Laṅkā: "Beloved city of Laṅkā, I never thought I would have to leave you while alive. Destiny willed otherwise. My brother could not trust me and banished me. You were drenched with the tears of the noble Sītā Devī. I have no power to free you from your plight. Soon Rāma will be here to punish Rāvaṇa. Please bid him welcome. I am now leaving for Rāma's abode to seek his succour. I leave my wife and my children in your protection. Please accept my salutations and allow me to take my leave of you."

Vibhīṣaṇa and friends flew in the sky. Soon they came within the sight of Sugrīva and his army.

SUSPICION

The characteristically suspicious Sugrīva viewed the coming of Vibhīṣaṇa with misgivings. He told his friends: "Look up at those people. They are fully armed. They seem to be Rāvaṇa's followers coming to kill us. These Rākṣasas are not to be trusted. Let us be careful."

Then the monkey army took up arms and was preparing for the fight. In order to convince them of his friendship, Vibhīṣaṇa cried aloud. "Mighty monkeys, please do not fear me. I have come to you as a friend. Even though I am the brother of the wicked Rāvaṇa, I know what is right and what is wrong. I sympathise with Sītā Devī; I have asked my wife and my children to look after her. I have pleaded on her behalf with my brother, but it was all fruitless. He even banished me for my counsel. I have now come here to seek Rāma's refuge. Please convey the news of our arrival to that great man."

Sugrīva was surprised by Vibhīṣaṇa's words; he was even non-plussed and unable to decide as to whether this visitor was to be trusted or not. Hanumān knows the truth, but he would not intervene until the time was ripe for such a step.

Sugrīva then went up to Rāma and said: "Lord, Rāvaṇa's brother Vibhīṣaṇa has come with four followers, seeking your help. These Rākṣasas are by nature untrustworthy. There must be some wicked plan behind this mission. Please advise me."

Rāma saw Vibhīṣaṇa and was favourably impressed. However, since he wanted to be guided by the wishes of the people, he sought out the opinion of the other monkey lords.

VARIOUS VIEWS

Then the monkey counsellors replied: "Lord Rāma, you yourself are the best judge of the situation. However, we realize that you spoke as you did out of regard for your hosts. We also know that you always form your judgment after consulting the common people. So we shall give our opinion severally."

Aṅgada opined that Vibhīṣaṇa belonged to the enemy camp and that, if after a while he proved his good faith, he could be kept in their midst or else banished.

Śarabha held a similar view.

Jāmbāvān said that Vibhīṣaṇa came of the same stock as Rāvaṇa and that, though momentarily disenchanted with his people, could not be for ever trusted. He also warned that he who left his own brother was capable of leaving his new friends.

THE RIGHT VIEW

At last Hanumān, who had had firsthand knowledge of Lanka and its people in addition to his native wisdom, thought the moment to throw oil on troubled waters had come.

He said: "Master, I do not want to show off my wisdom, but I should like to express to you what I consider is right. Since we

cannot know the real character of Vibhīṣaṇa, unless he lives with ■■■ for some time, we have to take his word for it and allow him to stay here. Surely, he would not have come at this juncture, along with these few followers (whom we can easily quell if they indulge in any foul play), if it were not for seeking refuge. Apart from being banished, Vibhīṣaṇa must have realized that if he stayed ■■■ in Laṅkā he would have had to face the punishment from us, along with his kinsmen.

“Besides, from his features and gestures, it is not hard to see that he is trustworthy. We might even find him useful in killing Rāvaṇa and his people, because he must be knowing their secrets. As you killed Vāli and returned the kingdom of Kiṣkindhā to Sugrīva, you may likewise kill Rāvaṇa and hand over Laṅkā to this gentle Vibhīṣaṇa.”

■ Rāma thought Hanumān spoke rightly. He addressed all the gathering: “Friends, I know you are all my well-wishers. I agree with Hanumān. If Vibhīṣaṇa were deceitful he would have stayed ■■■ in Laṅkā, like Kumbhakarna, helping Rāvaṇa. He would not have taken the risk of coming to us. If he means ill, we can always punish him. It is folly to send him back and to refuse the help he would eventually offer ■■■ in our attack on Rāvaṇa.”

But Sugrīva was not yet convinced. He said: “Even if Vibhīṣaṇa had come here with good intentions, he should still be shunned. For, a ■■■ who had all along been under the loving care of his elder brother must not leave him in his hour of need. He who betrayed his own people might very well betray us.”

Rāma replied: “I ■■■ understand your misgivings. You have had an unfortunate experience with your ■■■ brother, and you have naturally become suspicious. But please understand ■■■ while it is possible for relatives to fall out from ■■■ another in their envy and mutual hatred, people who are bound by the ties of selfless friendship are not likely to do harm to ■■■ another.”

DECISION

As Sugrīva still expressed doubts about Vibhīṣaṇa's good intentions, fearing that Rāvaṇa himself might have sent him as a

spy, Rāma replied that that it was his code to give refuge to all those who seek it from him and that he would spare even Rāvaṇa if the latter beseeched him:

*Sakṛdeva prapannāya tavāsmi iti ca yācate,
Abhayam sarva bhūtebhyo dadāmy etat vratam .*

At last Sugrīva was convinced and said that his own inner voice spoke to him about the genuineness of Vibhīṣaṇa's plight and plea.

REFUGE

Vibhīṣaṇa, who at a distance was observing this conversation between Rāma and Sugrīva, saw signs of hope.

Beckoned by Sugrīva, he, along with his four followers, approached Rāma and fell at his feet, which seemed to say: "Vibhīṣaṇa, you are a very lucky man; that is why you are able to touch the feet of Rāma. Now rest assured that your life is in safe hands and that you will soon be the monarch of Laṅkā."

This was the greatest moment in Vibhīṣaṇa's life: he felt the grace of Rāma entering his whole being. He felt a supreme consciousness of transcendental bliss.

Looking at him Rāma was convinced of the wisdom of Hanumān's words. No ordinary Rākṣasa would ever be able to give expression to such a divine feeling as Vibhīṣaṇa did at that moment through all his features.

Vibhīṣaṇa supplicated: "Lord Rāma, I have left all my material wealth behind in Laṅkā and have come to you seeking my spiritual salvation in your service."

Rāma replied: "Be not afraid, friend. I shall take care of you. Now please tell me about the strength and weakness of Rāvaṇa and his army."

Vibhīṣaṇa said: "Lord, Rāvaṇa was too sure that no harm could come to him from humans and monkeys, he obtained a boon from Brāhmā that he could not be vanquished (only) by the gods

and the demi-gods, the titans and the angels. My other elder brother, Kumbhakarna, though aware of right and wrong, could not leave Rāvaṇa because of his brotherly love. But I thought I should prefer righteousness to evil, even if that would mean relinquishing one's own people.

"That is why I have come to you and am telling you about the strength and the weakness of my brother Rāvaṇa and his army. I have just now told you about Rāvaṇa. His commander-in-chief Prahasta is also a mighty man who once conquered Kubera's commander-in-chief, Mānibhadra. Rāvaṇa's son, Indrajit, enters the battlefield with an impenetrable armour, and when he finds himself in a tight corner, he has the power of becoming invisible by virtue of a boon he obtained from Lord Agni. The other heroes like Mahādhīra, Mahāpārśva and Akampana, too, are cunning fighters who once aided Rāvaṇa in vanquishing Indra."

Rāma said: "Vibhīṣaṇa, I thank you for the information. I am sure I can conquer Rāvaṇa, even if he is helped by the mightiest or even if he hides himself in heaven or any other world. Afterwards I shall crown you king of Laṅkā."

Vibhīṣaṇa has no craving for the kingdom; his only wish was for the safety of the people of Laṅkā, which could be ensured only through returning Sītā Devī to Rāma. He replied: "Lord, I know you are rightly known as the friend of those who seek your refuge, be they good or evil. I have no lust for kingship; all that I want is that Laṅkā should not be destroyed for the folly of one man. And then, after helping you take back Sītā Devī, I should like to serve you."

Rāma thanked God for having given him the friendship of such a good person as Vibhīṣaṇa.

ABLUTION

Embracing Vibhīṣaṇa in a gesture of goodwill and friendship, Rāma asked Lakṣmaṇa to anoint him with the sacred waters of the ocean. Lakṣmaṇa did accordingly, thereby setting the seal on one of the great friendships on earth. Hanumān was gratified that he

was indirectly instrumental in bringing it about. He and Sugrīva requested Vibhīṣaṇa to suggest to them the best way of crossing the sea.

Vibhīṣaṇa replied: "You all know that it was Rāma's forefather Sagara who dug this ocean. Therefore he, the sea-god, will easily make way for Rāma."

Then Lakṣmaṇa and Sugrīva also told Rāma that his first duty was to appease the sea-god, for thereby, their task of rescuing Sītā Devī would be made easier.

Accordingly, Rāma prayed to the sea-god with due ceremony and sincerity. The sea-god was gratified that such a one as Rāma was bowing to him. He himself returned the salute by sending up his waves to touch the feet of Rāma.

Here at Laṅkā, one of Rāvaṇa's wily spies, Śārdūla, returned with the news that Sugrīva had amassed his troops on the other side of the ocean and was preparing to cross it any moment. He advised Rāvaṇa to seek the alternatives of compromise and strategy, for it was **■ ■ ■** trying to withstand the onslaught of Rāma and his allies.

Rāvaṇa accepted the advice and asked the bird-king Śuka to convey the following message to Sugrīva from him.

ŚUKA'S MESSAGE

"Friend Sugrīva, you **■ ■ ■** the monarch of Kiṣkindhā, a high-born one. Your father Rkṣarāja **■ ■ ■** a child of Brahmā; **■ ■ ■** you **■ ■ ■** a cousin of mine. So why should you befriend Rāma, an ordinary mortal, and an enemy of our clan? It is true that he helped you, but you must realize that he did **■** only out of self-interest and that he would forsake you eventually. As for my misdeed of carrying off Sītā, it **■ ■ ■** an act of retaliation for the crimes Rāma perpetrated against my friends and relatives. You **■ ■ ■** now engaged in an impossible task: it is not easy to cross the sea. Even if you succeed in doing so, you cannot conquer **■ ■ ■** on our home-ground. Please give up this idea of picking **■** quarrel with mighty opponents, and go back to Kiṣkindhā and enjoy the favours of Tārā."

Śuka flew up to Sugrīva and conveyed the message. The angered monkeys caught hold of the bird and were about to pull out its wings, when it sought the help of Rāma. It cried out: "Lord, it is not fair to ill-treat a messenger. I was only carrying out my master's orders. Please see that I am not tortured."

Rāma requested the monkeys to let him go.

Before flying back to Laṅkā, Śuka asked Sugrīva for his reply.

REJOINDER

Sugrīva said: "Śuka, be thankful that you were set free because of Rāma's kind intervention. Go tell your master from me that my friendship with Rāma has been sealed with such strong bonds ■ cannot be snapped by the wildest strategy; that the fate that overtook the mighty Vāli for stealing another's wife is awaiting Rāvaṇa also; that it is silly on the part of ■ ■ ■ who was severely beaten up by Vāli, whom Rāma killed, to think that Rāma is ■ weak mortal; and that the ■ Rāma is going to punish him for his misdeed."

While Sugrīva was giving this message, Aṅgada closely observed Śuka's features and thought that there ■ mischief in the bird's looks. Fearing that he ■ an ingenious spy, and thinking that it was folly to let him go free, the monkeys flew up into the sky and once again tried to kill him. Again Śuka appealed for Rāma's help, which was readily given. At Rāma's behest the monkeys released the bird-messenger, who flew back home quietly.

AN ORDEAL

Rāma then began his penance to placate the sea-god. He lay himself down on ■ bed of grass, controlling his mental, physical and vocal impulses. The sea-god ■ amazed at Rāma's power of self-restraint and ■ at a loss to devise a method of relinquishing his natural powers to help Rāma and his army to cross the waters easily.

Even after three days passed by, no tangible reward for his penance appeared before Rāma. So he turned to Lakṣmaṇa and spoke up:

*Praśamaśca kṣamā caiva ārjavam priyavāditā,
Aśamarthyam phalantye nirguṇeṣu satām guṇāḥ.
Ātmapraśamśinam duṣṭam dhr̥ṣṭam viparidhāvakam,
Sarvatrotsr̥ṣṭadaṇḍam ■ lokāḥ satkurute naram.*

“Brother, in this world of ours appearances often count more than inner qualities. People look down on ■■■ of gentleness and integrity of character, whereas they bow down to self-seeking and self-important wicked men. Even this sea-god seems to mistake my goodness for weakness. Since it ■■■ to be impossible to convince him through persuasion, I will have to resort to the ■■■ of force to bring him to his senses. Please bring me my weapons: I shall strike him with one of my charmed arrows and he will dry up.”

Rāma flung his weapons at the sea. They pierced the whole mass of waters with terrific force. All the sea creatures came out in terror. The arrows even went down into the nether world where its denizens too were severely frightened. But still, the sea-god would not relent. Rāma was then about to attack him with his most powerful weapon, when Lakṣmaṇa caught his hand and begged him to desist.

Rāma then angrily addressed the sea: “O sea-god, how dare you thwart my wishes? If I choose, I can suck up all your strength with my fire-flinging arrows. You seem to be misguided by some demonic agency.”

With that he was attempting to be as good as his word, when he saw the sea-god appealing to him thus.

LAW OF NATURE

The sea-god said: “Lord Rāma, you know I am one of the five elements whose laws ■■■ relentless.

*Pr̥thivī vāyurākāśamāpo jyotiśca, rāghava,
Svabhāve, saumya, tiṣṭhanti śāśvatam mārgamāśritāḥ.*

“The thickness and immobility of the earth, the free movement of air, the depth and wetness of water, the flaming and burning of fire and the empty space of ether ■■■ there by

inexorable nature. I do not want to come in your way; you for your part should not forget your sense of right and wrong in your momentary disappointment. Please build a bridge ~~across~~ my surface; I shall co-operate with you to the extent I can. I wish you success in your efforts and request you to come back here as a conquering hero."

As Rāma had already aimed his *Brahmāstra*, which could not be withdrawn, he asked the sea-god as to what should be done with it.

The sea-god advised him to fling it at the sinners who were roaming about in the region of *Druma* river, drunk on its intoxicating waters.

As Rāma did accordingly, the waters of that river dried up and all the creatures in and around it perished. Afterwards, a fertile forest grew out of it, thanks to Rāma's blessings.

PLAN

The sea-god ~~was~~ much gratified. He said: "Lord Rāma, the monkey Nala is the son of the divine architect Viśvakarma. He has all the attributes of his father. Besides, his zeal is matchless. Please entrust the supervision of construction of the bridge to him and your task will be successfully fulfilled." Promising again that he would do his best to ~~see~~ that the bridge would be safe ~~on~~ its foundation, he took his leave of Rāma and disappeared.

Then Rāma sent for Nala and told him what transpired between him and the sea-god. Nala replied: "Lord, the sea-god has reminded ~~me~~ of the boon my father granted to my mother ~~on~~ mount Mandara. I will now be true to that blessing."

BRIDGE

On Nala's orders the monkeys began pulling out ~~trees~~ and even small hills. With them, they completed the construction of the bridge within five days. They used ~~all~~ their ~~skill~~ and energy to ~~make~~ it soft enough for Rāma's tender feet to tread upon.

The bridge looked as though it were the parting-line in the hair of the sea-god. Poor Rāvaṇa, he thought he was invincible because of his boons. Now even his other self-assurance, that his island could not be reached by the outside world, was being belied.

The gods in heaven were pleased with the work of the monkey army. They blessed them with flowers. Even as the monkeys were delighted to have the heavenly petals fall on their heads, the flowers themselves were looking forward to the joy of Rāma's feet touching them.

Vibhīṣaṇa was guarding the rear as they all began crossing the sea. After walking over the approaches to the sea, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were carried on the shoulders of Hanumān and Aṅgada respectively.

After a while, they reached the other side, where they were welcomed by the angels and archangels who specially came down from heaven for the purpose. As Vedic hymns were being chanted, the divine visitors blessed Rāma.

Rāma took a glance at the city from the heights of mount Trikūṭa. Looking at its splendour, he was reminded of his own capital, Ayodhyā.

Sensing that the time for battle had come, he ordered the troops to take their respective positions.

ŚUKA'S STORY

Śuka returned to Rāvaṇa's court and reported all that happened to him on the other side of the sea.

When Rāvaṇa taunted him for his frightened appearance, he replied: "Lord, Rāma is no ordinary mortal. He has been able to win the allegiance of the mighty monkey hordes who built a bridge across the ocean within a few days. He is now here and will surely crush all of us, unless we seek his mercy. I suggest you return Sītā to him and beg his forgiveness."

Rāvaṇa heard the words with much concern. He thought that there was no one chiding him. Instead, he called two of his trusted

advisers and ordered them to find out the facts of Rāma's entry and readiness for fight.

SPIES

The two spies accordingly entered the monkey ranks in disguise. Vibhiṣaṇa could easily see through their disguise. He handed them over to Rāma. The terrified men supplicated Rāma for mercy. Rāma granted their wish and said: "You men are free to inspect our army and its deployment. We have no secrets to be afraid of. Nor do we punish unarmed people."

The Rākṣasas thanked Rāma for his magnanimity and stood obediently to hear his further message.

MESSAGE

Rāma asked the spies: "Please convey these words of mine to Rāvaṇa: 'Rāvaṇa, you are a great devotee of Lord Śiva. Still, you committed the unforgivable folly of abducting Sitā. It is even now not too late to repent and seek my pardon. I give you time till tomorrow morning. If by then you do not come to me to beg my pardon, you will be the one responsible for the destruction of your city and your people.'

The spies carried Rāma's message to Rāvaṇa and also informed him about the formation of Rāma's army.

Rāvaṇa thought that the men were exaggerating, and wanted to make sure for himself. So he went along with them to the top of his palace and asked them to point out the important heroes in the foe's army.

THE MONKEY ARMY

One of the two spies, named Sāraṇa, said: "There, the one shouting like a lion and facing us is Nala, the commander-in-chief. The one in front of them all is Sugrīva. The one gesticulating angrily and striking his tail against the ground is Aṅgada, the son of Vāli. The other heroes behind him are Śveta. Kumuda,

Rambha, Śarabha, Pavana, Vinata, Krodhana and Gavaya. They are all as strong as a lion and are capable of assuming any form they like. On the right side is the old warrior Jāmbavan who helped Indra, the leader of the gods, in the fight between the demigods and the demons. Behind him are Hara, Dhūmra, Dambha, Sannāda, Krodhana, Pramādi, Gavākṣa, Śatanali and other seasoned fighters. On the left is Kesari, the captain hailing from the treasure-trove, mount Kāñcana. In this army are heroes who pick up and fling out even mountains, though they were flower bunches.

“Lord, a little farther are to be seen Mainda and Dvidida who have imbibed ambrosia; by their side are the sons of the God of Death, Sumukha and Durmukha. They are all invincible.

“Ah, there! Towering above them all is the jewel of the Ikṣvāku dynasty:

*Yasmin na calate dharmo, yo dharmam nā' tivartate,
Yo brāhmam astraṁ vedāmsca, veda vedavidāṁ varaḥ.*

“He abides by *Dharma* and *Dharma* abides in him; he knows both the military and the metaphysical facets of Vedic lore. Next to him is the golden-hued brother of his, Lakṣmaṇa:

*Amarshī durjaya jetā vikrānto buddhimān bālī,
Rāmasya dakṣiṇo bāhuḥ, nityam prāṇo bahiṣcaraḥ.*

“He indeed is the right-hand of Rāma; as unconquerable and unmovable in his dedication to duty as his elder brother is, this Lakṣmaṇa.

“Behind them is your own brother Vibhiṣaṇa, who is now bent on doing you harm.

“Bringing up the rear is the king of monkeys, Sugrīva. You can see him well-adorned by the golden necklace presented him by his late brother Vāli.

“All these great leaders and their heroic hordes constitute a veritable force of the universe's utmost energy.”

Rāvaṇa took a keen glance and was fearfully impressed.

BRAGGADOCIO

Still, true to his nature, Rāvaṇa wanted to show off. He thundered at the two spies:

“You fellows subsist on the food I provide for you. You have no right to praise my foe’s strength. Thanks to your former good deeds, I am leaving you unhurt. But such tactless ■■■ like you have no place in my kingdom. I banish you from Laṅkā. Leave ■■■ now.”

Actually, there ■■■ nothing wrong with their report. But Rāvaṇa lost all sense of proportion. He now sent for some more spies and commanded them to go in disguise and detect the weaknesses of Rāma’s army.

Led by Śārdūla they entered the enemy ranks. Vibhīṣaṇa could ■■■ through their disguise: They met with the same lot of their forerunners: tortured by the monkeys and released by Rāma’s kindness.

They reported all that happened to Rāvaṇa, who retired to his inner sanctum to plan his next strategy.

WILE

Rāvaṇa made up his mind to seduce Sītā and conquer Rāma by foul means, and to that end instructed one of his magicians, Vidyujjihva, to create a replica of Rāma’s severed head and of his bow and arrows.

The magician did as instructed. Rāvaṇa took the false figures with him and went up to meet Sītā in the Aśoka garden. There she was lying on the bare ground, uttering the ■■■■ of Rāma.

Rāvaṇa addressed her: “Poor woman, how unfortunate you are! Your husband is no more. You wouldn’t trust my word, and you placed your trust in a mere mortal. The one obstacle between us is removed. Come to ■■■ and we shall be happy together. There is no point in regretting the past.”

Sītā didn’t even care to ■■■ her head to glance at him.

Rāvaṇa wouldn't give up. He clarified his information: "Do believe me, Sītā. I don't say your heroic husband died on the battle-field. One of my commanders, Prahasta, stealthily entered at night, the camp of Rāma and his army after they reached Laṅkā, and cut off the head of Rāma. Here you see that severed head. Looking at that gruesome sight, Lakṣmaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa took to their heels. But Prahasta caught hold of Hanumān and Sugrīva and killed them. Jāmbavan, Aṅgada, Mainda and Dvivida also were severely wounded in the ambush. Since the best of them ■■■ either dead or disabled, you cannot expect Rāma's followers to rescue you now."

With these words he placed at her feet Rāma's false head and his weapons. At the touch of that head Sītā was extremely frightened, and fearing the worst, she uttered a shriek and fainted.

LAMENT

After ■ while Sītā regained consciousness. Looking at that false head she began to wail: "O jewel of Ikṣvāku race, is this the end that Fate has decreed? How can your mother face this tragedy? What place have I in this world without Rāma? Are all those prophecies of great astrologers who predicted long life for you mere fallacies? Oh my lord, are all the vows we took together, and all these weapons we prayed to, to be broken and made futile thus? What happened to your promise at our wedding that you would never leave ■■■ alone? Oh, wretched am I that you should be ■ prey to death on my account!"

Turning to Rāvaṇa, she said: "I have ■■ ■■■ for life without Rāma. I shall join him ■■■ his funeral fire. So don't entertain any hope of enjoying my company."

Again she lamented: "Rāma, here, take me: I am coming to you."

Then she swooned. Rāvaṇa ■■■ amazed at her steadfast character. He saw his plan was in vain. Having heard from a messenger that Prahasta was awaiting his return to the court, he retraced his steps. Along with him disappeared the false head and the false weapons.

Arriving at the palace, Rāvaṇa asked his ministers to order the army to get ready for the fight and to challenge the enemy by sounding the bugles.

SARAMĀ

Vibhīṣaṇa's wife, Saramā, heard the lion-like roars of the monkey army, as they entered Laṅkā. She was assured by those hearty cries that both Rāma and her husband were doing well. And when the false tokens that Rāvaṇa brought vanished after his departure, she was further satisfied that it was all his ruse and that no harm had really ~~come~~ to Rāma. So she decided on encouraging Sītā Devī.

"Dear Sītā, please look up! All that just happened was a trick of Rāvaṇa. Those false proofs have vanished now. I have come to tell you that Rāma is here in Laṅkā with his mighty monkey hordes. The frightened Rāvaṇa learnt about Rāma's invincibility and took to such vile ruses in his helplessness."

As she spoke these words, all around were to be heard doglike barks. They denote the preparedness of the Rākṣasas for war.

Saramā renewed her reassuring words. "All these barks do not indicate corresponding bites. There is no power on earth that can subdue Rāma. All the ladies of Rāvaṇa's home also advised him to make friends with Rāma before it was too late. But he wouldn't listen."

It was indeed the great goodness of a merciful providence that brought this good woman Saramā to console the noble lady Sītā. At just that moment Sītā could also hear the blowing of the conch-shells by Rāma's soldiers, and she felt quite reassured about his safety.

The astrologers accompanying the army fixed an auspicious ~~moment~~ for the attack on Laṅkā. All around ~~heard~~ heard the cry: "Long live Lord Rāma! All hail to him!" The gods in heaven showered flower-petals on Rāma's army as a token of their blessings.

Saramā advised Sītā to pray to the light of the world, the Sun-God. She did so, and the Sun-God told himself that he would protect her interests without fail.

MĀLYAVĀN

At Rāvaṇa's court, Mālyavān tried to convince his great-nephew about his folly. He said: "Rāvaṇa, you have brought on yourself this war because of your abduction of Sītā. All the gods ■■■ on the side of Rāma, because he is the embodiment of *Dharma*.

"I do not have to remind you that Brahmā created the world on the basis of the good and the evil actions of those that were to be born. *Dharma* and *Adharma* are respectively represented by the godly and the demoniac in all nature. Men of wisdom learn to discriminate between these two forces, and help virtue to conquer vice. We are now living in *Tretā Yuga* when evil has already set in. But there is no need to let evil prevail over good, even now as in the future *Kali Yuga*. *Dharma* still holds the upper hand though not as fully ■ in *Kṛitā Yuga*.

*Dharmo vai grasate'dharmam yadā kṛitamabhūt yugam,
Adharmo grasate dharmam tadā taṣyaḥ pravartate*

"Just see how because of your misdeed, all *Laṅkā* is showing signs of decay and is facing destruction. Please do not sacrifice the interests of ■ whole race for your personal whim."

FOOLISH WORDS

Rāvaṇa was in no mood to listen to such wise words. Angrily he shouted: "You old fellow, you seem to be on the side of the enemy; you can't fool me with such vain philosophy. I am the king of this land and I know what is best for its people. As for the destruction of our race, I feel I ■■■ invincible and I can protect it in any war. However, it is not in my nature to repent or to seek forgiveness:

*Dvidhā bhajyeyamapyevam na nameyantu kasyacit,
Eṣa me sahaḥ doṣaḥ svabhāvo duratikramaḥ*

"I won't yield to anyone even if I would be cut into two pieces", Mālyavān could reply this only with pitiful good wishes for luck.

Rāvaṇa then made arrangements for the city's defence. He placed Prahasta at the east gate, Mahāpārśva at the south, Indrajit at the west, and Śuka, Śaraṇa and himself at the north.

At the other end Sugrīva, Hanumān and Aṅgada approached Rāma and told him of their readiness for fight and the plans they made for breaking into the tightly-guarded city of Laṅkā.

DEPLOYMENT OF ARMY

Vibhīṣaṇa then informed Rāma about the information that his four followers, disguised as birds, brought from their reconnaissance of the Rākṣasa army: how the four gates were guarded and how in the centre of the town Virūpākṣa was holding the fort with the aid of innumerable battalions.

Rāma thanked him for the news. Vibhīṣaṇa then asked Rāma to attack the city from all sides and assured him of eventual success.

Rāma ordered Nila to attack the east gate, Aṅgada the south, Hanumān the west. Since he wanted to take on Rāvaṇa himself, he and Lakṣmaṇa stood before the north gate. He asked Vibhīṣaṇa, Jāmbavān and Sugrīva to get into the middle of the town. He further ordered the monkeys not to assume any other form—so that in any confusing skirmish they might not be mistaken for the enemy.

Having made the plans, Rāma and his followers retired for the night on mount Suvēla. From the top of the hill they could see the shining splendour of the city of Laṅkā, the creation of the divine architect Viśvakarma. On the terrace of his splendid palace, Rāvaṇa could be seen arrayed in his supreme raiment and rich ornaments, and surrounded by his beloved women. Lakṣmaṇa was moved to hit him there and then with his arrow, but desisted for fear of angering his brother who is against foul play even in war.

HASTY STEP

But the monkey-king Sugrīva couldn't contain himself. Before anyone could stop him he took a sudden jump and stood before Rāvaṇa and shouted in his face: "You king of Laṅkā, you abducted the noble Sītā and you shall now pay for your sin. I have come to deal your death."

Saying that, Sugrīva pulled out Rāvaṇa's diamond-studded crown and flung it on to the ground.

The crown seemed to tell itself: "How good is Sugrīva! He did the right thing in removing me from the head of the sinful Rāvaṇa. Today I feel as if I had attained salvation. Surely it is my duty to welcome Rāma, for, with his touch, I will be hallowed. Oh how happy I would be at the moment when Rāma places me on Vibhīṣaṇa's head, following his promise!"

Rāvaṇa himself was highly indignant. He was not the one to yield to anyone. He said: "You wretched Sugrīva, I know who you are, you who deceived your own brother. How dare you threaten me? Now forget all thought of going back to Kiṣkindhā and enjoying the company of your wife Rāma." With these words, he caught hold of Sugrīva and, whirling him for a while, dropped him to the ground. Sugrīva got up instantaneously and jumped upon Rāvaṇa. Then followed a fierce fist fight between those two mighty warriors. At last Rāvaṇa was too tired to continue the struggle. Seeing that he was unconscious, and that it was Rāma's turn to kill him, Sugrīva left him there and returned to his people who congratulated him on his courageous deed.

But the righteous Rāma was not so happy about Sugrīva's action. He said: "Friend, I know you are capable of subduing even Indra and that you let Rāvaṇa go because of your awareness of my decision. However, it was rash on your part to take on Rāvaṇa in such a way. I hope you will never again act so hastily like this. I have only two wishes left: to kill Rāvaṇa and crown Vibhīṣaṇa, and to return to Ayodhyā and ask Bharata to continue his rule over the kingdom."

All those present heard him with deep sympathy, but they knew in their heart of hearts that it was he himself who should rule

the Kosala kingdom and perpetuate the name of heavenly *Rāma Rājya*.

Sugrīva said: "Lord Rāma, as soon as I saw the rascal who abducted Sītā Devī, I could not restrain myself. After a while I remembered it was your part to kill him and let him go. Forgive me for my hastiness. I know you are unconquerable and can kill him yourself."

Rāma praised Sugrīva and asked Lakṣmaṇa to take every care that the monkey army does not suffer undue losses in the battle.

Then the army took up their preplanned positions. The city of Laṅkā was so closely surrounded by them not to allow even air to get in.

ANGADA'S EMBASSY

Rāma thought it was right to send a final message to Rāvaṇa. So he asked Aṅgada to go to Rāvaṇa and tell him that he would not be punished if even at this late stage he would return Sītā.

Aṅgada accordingly went to Rāvaṇa's court. Rāvaṇa was frightened at the sight of him, for he already had experienced the terror visited on his city by another monkey-hero, Hanumān.

Aṅgada conveyed Rāma's message to Rāvaṇa.

Rāvaṇa was senselessly offended by this just embassy, and, forgetting all canons of justice, instructed his men to arrest Aṅgada and torture him.

Four Rākṣasas caught hold of Aṅgada. He pretended as though he was helpless in their arms, and as soon as he found their hands on him he lifted them all up into the sky and from up there he threw them down. The wretched Rākṣasas dropped dead at the feet of Rāvaṇa. Rāvaṇa realized it was a bad omen.

Aṅgada returned to the camp safely and reported the failure of his mission to Rāma.

Hearing that, Sugrīva asked his followers to get ready for the fight.

SIEGE

Rāvaṇa heard that the monkey army was about to attack his city. Asking his commanders to redouble their efforts and resources, he once again went up to the top of his palace to take a look at the enemy.

At about the same time Rāma, too, inspected his army and looked around to see how the enemy was preparing for the fight.

On housetops and turrets the flags of Laṅkā were flying in an enthusiastic whirl, ■ though they were welcoming Rāma and asking him to replace Rāvaṇa by Vibhīṣaṇa.

At the sight of Rāma, the monkeys felt inspired and they got ready for the fight with supreme self-confidence and strength. Their shouts of 'Hail Rāma' Hail Sugrīva' were resounding even in the skies.

From his vantage point Rāvaṇa was tremendously affected by the way the enemy was getting into position and was destroying the gates and the citadels of his town. He was not sure his kingdom was safe in his hands, but he thought he would rather die than surrender to Rāma. He went down to the court and ordered his men to butcher the monkeys. The Rākṣasas shouted their war cries and jumped into the fray.

As the *Rākṣasas* clashed with the *Vānaras* on all four sides of the city, the whole scene resembled lightning and thunder in cyclonic weather.

MIXED FIGHT

Hearing the Rākṣasas' lion-like shouts, the Vānaras answered with equally loud cries, and plucking trees and boulders flung them on the enemy. The Rākṣasas replied with javelin and sword thrusts.

In the resulting melee, the Rākṣasas had the worst. Rāvaṇa heard the news and gave instructions for his reserve forces to join the battle.

Rāvaṇa's son Indrajit set out to the battlefield and found himself clashing with Aṅgada. Indrajit tried to hit him with his mace, but Aṅgada resisted it with ease. Besides, he killed within the space of a few seconds Indrajit's horses and charioteer, and broke up his golden chariot.

Jambumāli attacked Hanumān, but suffered heavy blows from the monkey hero.

Nala plucked out the eyes of Prataghana who challenged him. He beat up and killed Praghasa who tried to hit him with an arrow.

Agniketu, Raśmikutu, Suptaghna and Yajñakopa directed a great flow of arrows and weapons all over Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. But Rāma warded them off with his Fire weapon, in the process beheading the four Rākṣasas.

Similarly, the Vānara, Nīla, cut off the head of the Rākṣasa Nikumbha, who was self-satisfiedly showering arrows on the former.

The whole battlefield was a mess of broken limbs, weapons and arrows and of spilled blood.

When it was dark, the fighting still continued, even though neither Vānaras nor Rākṣasas could always tell one from another.

Lakṣmaṇa unleashed his Snake weapons over the enemy and they pierced through the hearts of the Rākṣasas. Rāma's weapons wounded the vitals of Mahodara, Mahāpārśva, Yajñaśatru, Vajradamṣṭra, Śuka and Sāraṇa who, consequently, ran for their lives. Rāma's weapons indeed lighted up the prevailing darkness and burned out many a Rākṣasa life.

THE NĀGA SNARE

Indrajit simply vanished after being humiliated by Aṅgada. Rāma sensed some ruse in this act and warned his men to be vigilant because the Rākṣasa warrior might attack them invisibly.

At that juncture, Indrajit employed his charmed *Nāga* (serpent) weapons which snared both Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Rāma

asked the monkeys to try and find out where exactly Indrajit was. They searched on all sides, but in vain.

The stone-hearted Indrajit was not content with merely binding the princes. He pierced their bodies with a further flow of arrows. The severely wounded Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa fell on to the ground. The sight evoked wails from the vānaras.

Indrajit concealed himself behind clouds and addressed the princes: "Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, please note that even Indra could not conquer me." With that he hit them yet again with his arrows.

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa even lost the use of their sight. Even the vānaras were helplessly crying over the princes' predicament. Indrajit boasted to his people that he had vanquished Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa who had all along been a thorn in the flesh of Rāvaṇa, and that he could defeat the vānaras also with the aid of his charmed weapons.

He almost made good his threat by wounding the mighty monkey heroes, Nīla, Mainda, Dvidida, Jāmbavān, Hanumān, Gavākṣa, Śarabha and others. Then to convey the good news to his father, he went back to the royal palace.

Sugrīva saw the damage done and was helplessly crying. He could only pray to God to revive Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa.

CONSOLATION

Vibhīṣaṇa then approached Sugrīva and said: "Brother, success and defeat are in the hands of God. Besides, just note the facial expression of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. They have merely fainted; they are not dead. And you know how they were blessed by sages and gods to achieve success in this battle. Do not grieve over a temporary setback."

Vibhīṣaṇa sprinkled water, uttering a hymn of relief from sadness, over the faces of the brothers. He also wiped away the tears from Sugrīva's face and further assured him that nothing un-toward had happened and that all would be right in the end. Sugrīva was slowly reassured.

Rāvaṇa was pleased with his son's prowess and asked him to root out the rest of Rāma's army too. He thought this was the time to have another try at convincing Sītā about the need to join him. So he asked the Rākṣasa maids to take her to the place where Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were in an unconscious state.

As Sītā was taken in the Puṣpaka airplane to the battlefield she saw the whole atmosphere was submerged in grief. §

Hanumān touched Sītā's feet and cried like a child. She in her turn wailed inconsolably and after a while fell in a swoon. The whole region of mount Trikūṭa seemed to melt away in grief.

The good Rākṣasa lady, Trijaṭā, accompanied Sītā and witnessed the scene. She restored Sītā to her senses and assured her: "Dear lady, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are alive. Puṣpaka plane is built by gods: it wouldn't have brought us here, if the royal brothers were really dead. Be sure they will revive soon."

So saying, Trijaṭā escorted Sītā back to Aśoka garden.

RĀMA'S LAMENT

Slowly Rāma came to. As he opened his eyes he saw Lakṣmaṇa in an unconscious state. He lamented:

*Śakyā sītā samā nāri martyaloke vicinvatā,
Na lakṣmaṇa samo bhrātā sacivaḥ sâmparāyikah.*

"Even the noble Sītā may have her peers among chaste women in this world. But a brother, minister and strategist like Lakṣmaṇa cannot be found anywhere:

"O Lakṣmaṇa, dear brother, all these years you watched over me faithfully. Has my own ill-luck took the form of a snake and bitten you? How can I live and fight without you? Is my promise to Vibhīṣaṇa to be broken?"

Turning to Sugrīva, Rāma said: "Hanumān has taken immense pains in crossing the ocean and finding Sītā. You and your people have made great sacrifices for my sake and have come

here. Now I am unable to make good use of your goodwill and friendship. Forgive me for the trouble I have given you all, and please go back to Kiṣkindhā."

Bidding farewell to the monkey army, Rāma again lost consciousness.

Vibhīṣaṇa then arrived on the scene. The monkeys thought he was Indrajit, and were about to run away when Sugrīva asked Jāmbavān to tell them the truth and reassure them about their safety.

Vibhīṣaṇa sprinkled holy waters over the faces of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Still, they did not regain consciousness. Then he cried: "Friends and comrades, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa seem to have been defeated by Indrajit who resorted to foul means. I have no hope of going back to my old home. I would rather die."

Sugrīva then consoled him and reiterated that the royal brothers would soon recover and kill Rāvaṇa. Then turning to Suṣeṇa he said: "Friend, as soon as the princes get up, please take them back to Kiṣkindhā. I will go into the city of Laṅkā and kill Rāvaṇa and his people myself."

RELEASE

Suṣeṇa replied: "Lord, when formerly there was a fight between the demons and the demi-gods, the former caused the latter to swoon by their ruses. Then the instructor of the demigods, Brhaspati, revived them by means of certain herbs. These herbs, named Saṅjīvakaraṇi and Viśalyakaraṇi, are now to be found on mount Droṇa in the midst of the 'Milk Sea'. Please send Hanumān to fetch them, and he will get them without fail."

The news of fainting of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa reached the divine eagle, Garuḍa, the traditional enemy of the snakes. As he holds the Ikṣvāku clan in high esteem, he immediately left for the battlefield to rescue the princes.

As the divine eagle was approaching the scene, the elements were unduly stirred. At the mere sight of Garuḍa, the snakes that

bound up Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa released their hold and ran for their life. Garuḍa fondly touched the princes and they got up immediately with renewed and redoubled energy. The vānaras shouted "Hail Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa! Hail Garuḍa!"

As Garuḍa took them in his arms, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa thanked him heartily for his graciousness. But since they did not know who he really was, they asked him to reveal his identity. Garuḍa satisfied their curiosity. Praising Rāma's dedication to *Dharma*, he requested him to spare the women and children of Laṅkā in the course of his eventual victory over Rāvaṇa. Wishing them success, Garuḍa took his departure. The vānaras bade him farewell by joyously blowing the conchshells.

Rāvaṇa, who was holding court at that moment, heard those sounds and they touched him like the roars of a lion. Guessing that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa must have regained consciousness, he asked his spies to go and find out. When they returned with confirmation of his guess Rāvaṇa was crestfallen.

DHŪMRĀKṢA

The king of Laṅkā was more than ever determined to see the end of the royal princes, without having to engage them in a fight himself. He then commissioned a great fighter among his army, Dhūmrākṣa, to go and kill Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa.

Dhūmrākṣa first wanted to get rid of Hanumān, and with that aim directed his chariot to the west. On the way, he, encountered several bad omens. However, with desperate abandon, he and his followers plunged into a battle with Hanumān and his troops. In the fight many Rākṣasas were put to death and the rest were torn into two separate ranks.

Still, the skilled Dhūmrākṣa rose to the occasion and pulled together his men. With greater determination they attacked the vānaras who temporarily had to retreat.

Hanumān took up the challenge and flung a big boulder at Dhūmrākṣa. The Rākṣasa evaded it, but his chariot was broken into pieces; the charioteer and the horses were killed. Dhūmrākṣa

then aimed ■ blow at Hanumān's head with his mace. Though the latter was hurt, he had enough strength left to pluck a big hill and fling it at the former, who found his head smashed thereby. The scared Rākṣasas ran away, to the delight of the vānaras.

Rāvaṇa learnt the news of Dhūmrākṣa's death and sent Vajradamṣṭra to replace him. This Rākṣasa commander, too, met with bad omens on the way. But still he went on and engaged Aṅgada in ■ fierce duel, in which he at last found his head cut off by the vānara leader. The vānaras extolled their hero's mighty act.

Rāvaṇa sent Akampana to take the place of Vajradamṣṭra, who fared no better. Hanumān broke his head with a big tree.

PRAHASTA

Told about his latest commander's death, Rāvaṇa called his ministers to court. He addressed the chief among them, Prahasta: "It seems the vānaras are no ordinary fighters. The best among our commanders were no match for them. Now it is up to you or Nikumbha or Kumbhakarna or Indrajit or me to resist their onslaught. I request you to go first with ■ big retinue. You must frighten the vānaras by your very presence and see that they take to their heels. When you find Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa unaided by them, you can easily arrest them and bring them down here.

Before accepting the commission, Prahasta answered his king in a tone of resignation, saying that their fate was sealed as a result of Rāvaṇa's unwillingness to repent and return Sītā to Rāma. He added, however, that it was his duty to abide by his king's decision. His faithfulness pleased Rāvaṇa.

The story of Prahasta's attack on the vānaras followed the pattern of that of his two predecessors. He lost many of his deputies and soldiers. Finally he himself plunged into the battle, and in ■ duel with Nīla, found his head broken by the latter.

Rāvaṇa sent ■■■■■ more warriors to fight with the monkeys, but none returned home alive.

THE GREAT BATTLE

At last Rāvaṇa himself left for the battlefield to the accompaniment of wild cheers from his people.

Rāma heard the noise and asked Vibhīṣaṇa to tell him what it was all about. He replied that Rāvaṇa was arriving to join the fight, along with his sons, Aṭikāya, Mahodara, Piśāca, Triśira, Kumbha, Nikumbha and Narāntaka.

Rāma looked at Rāvaṇa and thought: "Is this the fellow who stole Sītā? The rascal who has been harassing the demigods, the angels and the anchorites? The fool who asked his men to light up Hanumān's tail? For all his wickedness and folly, he does look like a mighty hero."

Rāvaṇa saw the royal brothers who were resplendent with ■ divine light. Still he boasted to his men that he on his own could conquer them, and asked the Rākṣasas to go back and protect the city from the possible vānara onslaught in his absence. Some of the warriors returned to the city.

Rāvaṇa set about his attack in earnest. Sugrīva pulled out a big mountain and flung it at him. But Rāvaṇa turned the mountain into powder by the strength of his pointed arrows. In his turn he pierced Sugrīva's heart with poisoned darts. On seeing their king falling in ■ swoon, the vānaras were plunged into great grief.

Then the vānara heroes, Gavaya, Gavakṣa, Sudamṣṭra, Jyotirmukha, Nabha and others, threw big boulders and trees at Rāvaṇa, who again met the onslaught with ease and filled many of their soldiers

Rāma, who was resting in his camp, was told about the death of many monkey heroes at the hands of Rāvaṇa. He wanted to go to the battlefield himself, but Lakṣmaṇa stopped him, saying that he alone would be able to conquer Rāvaṇa.

Rāma reluctantly agreed, but advised Lakṣmaṇa to note that Rāvaṇa was ■ cunning fighter and, therefore, should be dealt with in ■ similar manner, if needed.

Hanumān saw Lakṣmaṇa going to battle with Rāvaṇa. But he could not stand the sight of the young prince taking on the wily demon. So he challenged Rāvaṇa: "You demon, you may think that you have nothing to fear even from gods and demi-gods. But you surely must be prepared to be punished by the monkeys. Now, take this blow." So saying, he struck Rāvaṇa with his palm.

Rāvaṇa scoffed at him and gave him a blow on the chest with his fist. Though momentarily nonplussed, Hanumān returned the blow with a box on Rāvaṇa's back, which sent the demon reeling.

The vānaras cheered Hanumān, and even Rāvaṇa paid him a compliment for his valour. But Hanumān replied that as long as Rāvaṇa was really unhurt, he would not be satisfied with his valour. So he further attacked Rāvaṇa and was equally repulsed by the latter.

Rāvaṇa's blow caused Hanumān to fall down in a swoon. The Rākṣasas cheered their leader.

Rāvaṇa then turned to attack Nīla and wounded him severely.

Meanwhile Hanumān regained consciousness. He saw that Rāvaṇa was stooping to unjust tactics in his fight with Nīla. So he thought he should bide his time before again attacking the wicked demon.

Though he was much hurt by Rāvaṇa's arrows, Nīla summoned up enough strength to jump to Rāvaṇa's chariot mast. From there he began to annoy Rāvaṇa with kicks upon his crown and his bow. Rāvaṇa was exasperated and threw his Fire-Weapon at the monkey commander. Nīla fell down by that blow, but since he was born with the blessing of the Fire-God he did not die.

Rāvaṇa was overjoyed at his temporary success and marched forward where he fell into the heroic Lakṣmaṇa. After mutual taunting and challenging, the two began fighting each other severely. Rāvaṇa unleashed the Śakti weapon and it pierced Lakṣmaṇa's heart. Rāvaṇa tried to carry away the wounded Lakṣmaṇa, who was unconscious, but he did not have sufficient strength to lift him up.

Hanumān saw what Rāvaṇa was up to and, rushing forward, boxed the latter on his chest. Consequently, Rāvaṇa fell in his chariot.

Then Hanumān proceeded to where Lakṣmaṇa lay unconscious. Where Rāvaṇa failed, Hanumān succeeded in lifting Lakṣmaṇa because he was a friend. How friendship and devotion count more than brute strength was proved by this fact. An enemy with twenty hands could not match a friend with two hands.

As soon as Lakṣmaṇa was taken to where Rāma was, by Hanumān, the Śakti (power) that charmed Rāvaṇa's weapon had to flee in the mere presence of that divine incarnation.

Meanwhile Rāvaṇa came to, and fell upon the vānara hordes with renewed vigour. When the news reached Rāma, Hanumān requested him to go to the battlefield on his shoulders. Rāma did accordingly, and facing Rāvaṇa, said: "You wicked fellow, at last the time has come for you to pay for your sins, Lakṣmaṇa whom you mercilessly wounded will soon take his vengeance by killing your favourite son."

The cunning Rāvaṇa knew he could not directly kill Rāma. So he first aimed his arrows at Hanumān. Rāma was angered at this ruse, and retaliated with an onslaught by which Rāvaṇa's charioteer was killed, the flag on his chariot was torn and his crown fell to the ground and broken into pieces. He himself was severely hurt. Rāma thought that it was not fair to attack him further at that juncture, for he had a long day in the field.

Rāma said: "Rāvaṇa, I do not want to take advantage of your present helplessness. I shall fight with you when you are properly equipped. Go home and take rest. Come tomorrow and face me again."

The broken crown pieces seemed to mock Rāvaṇa and to say that it was time he returned home.

The shamed king of Laṅkā hesitated for a while, but, realizing that discretion was the better part of valour, retreated. There he spoke to his people thus: "Friends and comrades, today had been a bad day for all of us. It seems to me that I am the victim of

preordained retribution. The fairy, Vedavatī, whom I once assaulted, cursed that she would be the cause of my death in her next birth. I have also formerly killed an Ikṣvāku king, Anarha, who too said before breathing his last, that one of his posterity would kill me. I must also confess that I once offended Pārvatī by plucking out her father's abode, the Himālaya; similarly, I have hurt the feelings of Nandiśvara (whose descendants are the vānaras), and of the heavenly nymphs Rambhā and Puñjikasthalā. I must be now paying for all these mistakes of mine.

"Kumbhakarṇa must be sleeping all the time because of Brahmā's imprecation: however, he has many other curses on his head, which would hinder his killing of men and monkeys. Please wake him up and ask him to help me in this hour of my dire need."

KUMBHAKARṆA

Some Rākṣasas went up to Kumbhakarṇa, carrying with them many victuals to feed him when he would wake up.

First they tried to arouse him by patting on the back; then they shook him up; then they blew horns in his ears; then they plucked his hairs; then they beat him up with stones and sticks. When all these efforts failed, they brought a thousand elephants to walk on him. At last, this procedure roused him a little. Slowly he woke up, and as soon as he stood up, shouted that he was hungry. The Rākṣasas fed him many tons and tons of food and drink, which succeeded in bringing him to the awareness of his surroundings.

Then he asked the men: "There must be some good reason for your awakening me. I am now prepared to take on even Indra. Tell me, what's wrong? Don't be frightened, for I will take care of you all."

One of Rāvaṇa's advisers, Yūpākṣa, replied: "Lord, we have no fear of the gods. It is about men and monkeys we are now worried. You remember what Hanumān did to us and how he burnt up our city. Now Rāma had temporarily put Rāvaṇa out of action. Your brother wants you to come to his rescue. You should also protect us and Laṅkā."

Kumbhakarṇa: "What! Rāvaṇa was defeated! I can't stand this. I have no business with Right or Wrong. All I want is vengeance. I will tear to pieces these men and monkeys."

Before proceeding to the field, however, he wanted to consult his brother and went up to him.

Rāma met Kumbhakarṇa as he was on his way to Rāvaṇa's palace, and asked Vibhīṣaṇa to tell him who that ferocious-looking fellow was. Vibhīṣaṇa said: "Lord, he is my brother Kumbhakarṇa. Even as a child he swallowed many creatures. Even Indra could not withstand his onslaught and had to seek Brahmā's refuge. Brahmā cursed that Kumbhakarṇa should always be in the embrace of the goddess of Sleep. But when Rāvaṇa interceded on our brother's behalf, Brahmā granted that Kumbhakarṇa would awake once every six months.

"Rāma, your weapons have frightened Rāvaṇa and he is now sending Kumbhakarṇa to fight with you. Be prepared for a tough battle."

Rāma warned his commanders to be on the alert.

COUNSEL

Kumbhakarṇa approached Rāvaṇa and bowed to his feet. Embracing him fondly, Rāvaṇa asked him to teach Rāma a lesson.

Then Kumbhakarṇa replied: "You are now paying for your folly. You didn't heed my advice when I suggested that you return Sītā to Rāma. You have even forgotten the lessons of statecraft and war-craft, and did not pause to judge the strength of your enemy before fighting him, nor did you duly consult your ministers and friends.

"I know it is now too late to advise you. But I must remind you that the four-fold duties of an individual should be properly observed if one wants to lead a successful life: the scriptures insist on one's seeking Righteousness (Dharma) in the morning, Wealth (Artha) in the noon hours, Desire (Kāma) in the evening and Liberation (Mokṣa) in every moment of prayer and leisurely meditation. But you were always after Kāma.

"Even **now** if you repent and return Sītā, Rāma will forgive you. Of course, I **am** going to fight Rāma on your behalf if that is your wish. However, I thought it was my duty to counsel the correct course."

Rāvaṇa inwardly blamed his brother for these wise words. **He** spoke out: "Brother, I understand you. **But** I think your present duty is to cover up my fault by your bravery."

Kumbhakarna apologised for his officiousness and promised to punish Rāma for the latter's ill-treatment of Rāvaṇa.

MAHODARA

At that point the minister Mahodara advised Kumbhakarna: "Friend, you spoke rather pontifically at first. Rāvaṇa is not ignorant of *Dharma* and *Adharma*. We cannot always judge **our** acts by the rule of law, but must follow the counsels of opportunity. In life the main pursuit is of happiness. Besides, Rāma had killed many of **our** people in the forest of Janasthāna. It is our duty to revenge him.

"Anyway, I am glad you have in the end sided with your brother. But some of **us** will **come** with you and help you. For you alone cannot tackle the mighty Rāma."

Turning to Rāvaṇa, he said: "We are **now** going to fight with Rāma. If **we** win, well and good. If not, I wish to suggest **a** plan. **If** **we** die by Rāma's arrows we shall **come** and fall at your feet. We shall falsely shout that **we** killed Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Then you place **a** placard **on** **an** elephant trunk, saying that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were killed in battle, and have it taken around the city. Also get all our soldiers drunk and make them shout **all** over the city, **as** if they were conquering heroes. When Sītā **sees** and hears these jolly Rākṣasas, she will conclude that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa **were** vanquished. In her helpless state she will seek your patronage and company, for women are by nature fickle and self-seeking."

Hearing these words, Kumbhakarna **was** terribly angered and said: "Mahodara, stop talking rot. It was only by listening to the

foolish counsels of your likes that Rāvaṇa and Laṅkā have come to this pass. I am now going to battle to offset the follies of advisers like you. I don't need your help."

Rāvaṇa was pleased with his brother's brave words and said: "Kumbhakarṇa, I am really lucky in having a brother like you. I wish you godspeed. Come back to me as a victor."

Kumbhakarṇa proceeded on his mission, accompanied by some of his ferocious followers. Although he himself came across a few bad omens, the vānaras who saw him armed with a fierce javelin, were frightened at the sight.

Then Aṅgada said: "Friends and comrades, you must not shiver through cowardice, and retreat now. Haven't you promised to fulfil Rāma's errand?"

The vānaras were stirred by their leader's admonition and launched an emphatic attack on Kumbhakarṇa with the aid of plucked trees and boulders. But all their missiles failed to hurt the diamond hard skin of Kumbhakarṇa. Actually, the Rākṣasa hero succeeded in killing many of the vānaras. The rest fled or fainted.

Aṅgada again cheered up his followers which had the desired effect. Believing in the divine heritage of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, and in the invincibility of their own Hanumān, they came back to fight the demon with implicit faith in themselves.

A terrible battle ensued between the Rākṣasas under Kumbhakarṇa and the vānaras under Dvivida.

STRANGE FIGHT

Hanumān for his part directly attacked Kumbhakarṇa and managed to break the latter's head. But Kumbhakarṇa retaliated with a direct thrust of his javelin into Hanumān's body, as a result of which the vānara hero fell in a swoon, bleeding severely.

As the sight frightened the monkeys, who were again about to flee away, Nīla stopped their flight and himself threw a hill on Kumbhakarṇa. As Nīla's attack also proved futile, Rṣabha, Śarabha, Gavākṣa and Gandhamādana joined him in hitting the

Rākṣasa. Still, Kumbhakarna was really unhurt; indeed he mocked the monkeys.

As Kumbhakarna in his turn wounded the four monkey commanders, Aṅgada himself came forward and boxed Kumbhakarna on his chest. At last the demon was temporarily put out of action.

After ■ while, Kumbhakarna regained his strength and hit back Aṅgada. Aṅgada fainted. The *vānaras* were dejected.

RELEASE

Then Kumbhakarna turned his attention on Sugrīva. He thought if he conquered the monkey king, the victory over Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa would be made very easy.

Sugrīva saw this move and attacked the demon with ■ hill. The Rākṣasa threw his javelin at Sugrīva. At this juncture Hanumān came to, and, intercepting the javelin, broke it into two.

But Kumbhakarna was not yet out of the fight. He too pulled out a hill and threw it on Sugrīva. Sugrīva was hurt and he fell down, unconscious. The heartless demon Kumbhakarna lifted him up and carried him away to the city of Laṅkā. The Rākṣasas cheered him wildly.

But the *vānaras* were aggrieved. They prayed to God for their leader's safety. Hanumān was not worried; he knew that Sugrīva would surely find ■ way of escaping the Rākṣasa's punishment and that it would be presumptuous ■■ his part to go to his aid. If, however, Sugrīva could not save himself, Hanumān told himself that he would be prepared for any sacrifice to save his king.

As the triumphant Kumbhakarna returned home he ■■ given a hero's welcome. He was honoured with the sprinkling of perfumed water, which also fell on Sugrīva and revived him. The awakened monkey-king used his teeth and nails to harass the demon. Unable to withstand the pricks, Kumbhakarna threw down Sugrīva on to the ground. Immediately Sugrīva flew up into the sky and returned to Rāma's presence.

The Rākṣasas were dumbfounded; Kumbhakarṇa's pride suffered a blow. Already suffering from Sugrīva's bites, he was further frustrated by this escape and returned to the battlefield to take vengeance. He got hold of as many monkeys as he could and ate them up.

A TERRIFIC SIGHT

The more blood he sucked, the more flesh he ate, the thirstier and the hungrier Kumbhakarṇa grew. The vānaras ran up to Rāma for protection.

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were pleased that Sugrīva escaped from Kumbhakarṇa's clutches. But they were worried over the present voraciousness of the demon and wanted to teach him a lesson.

First Lakṣmaṇa attacked Kumbhakarṇa with seven arrows. But they had no great effect on him; he set his sights on Rāma and was advancing towards him. Rāma was astonished at the audacity of the Rākṣasa. As the latter approached him, Rāma released the charmed Rudra weapon. It pierced Kumbhakarṇa's heart and caused him to fall to the ground.

After a while Kumbhakarṇa regained consciousness, and, determined to keep his word to his brother, set upon the vānaras with increased ferocity. Not satisfied with the blood of the monkeys, he attacked Rāma with a huge boulder. Rāma's arrows broke the missile into pieces. Yet Kumbhakarṇa proceeded towards Rāma.

Rāma took pity on the demon who was sacrificing himself for his brother's sake. Before finally killing him, Rāma thought it was right to warn him. However, Kumbhakarṇa, while being grateful to Rāma's admonition, realized it was too late to go back to advise his brother as to the need to return Sītā and seek Rāma's friendship. He also knew it would be a blessing to die at the hands of Rāma. So, without capitulating to Rāma, he challenged him with his iron mace.

Rāma's proverbially invincible bow proved futile against the mace's thrust. Besides, Kumbhakarṇa was killing many more

monkeys. So Rāma had to unleash a charmed weapon, Vāyavya, which cut off one of the hands of the demon. Still unconquered, the demon plucked up a big tree and tried to hit Rāma with it. Smilingly, Rāma let go another powerful weapon, *Aindra*, which cut off Kumbhakarna's other hand. Yet again, the demon went forward to attack Rāma. Then Rāma released two crescent-shaped arrows which cut off Kumbhakarna's two legs.

Though he lost his hands and feet, Kumbhakarna was full of revenge and was trying to swallow Rāma with his mouth. Rāma sent some more arrows into the demon's mouth, which made him speechless. At last, Rāma repeated the *Aindra*-weapon stroke and it severed the demon's head.

REPENTANCE

The head of Kumbhakarna hit the city wall and ricocheted at Rāma's feet; it made its last speech of contrition to Rāma: "Lord, forgive my sins. Like Vibhishana, I too advised Ravana to hand back Sita to you. But whereas Vibhishana left our brother, I stuck to my brotherly duty. I know I was wrong, but like Lakshmana I placed brotherly love above all other considerations. So grant me your pardon and release me from the bonds of rebirth."

The noble Rāma granted the wretched demon's final wish.

Sugriva embraced Rāma in a gesture of congratulation. The gods in heaven showered flowers on him and Lakshmana. Hanuman, Angada and other monkey heroes offered their gratitude and felicitations to him and awaited his further orders.

At that very moment Ravana had a foreboding of evil. Could it be that something untoward befell Kumbhakarna? Even as he so wondered, news was brought to him of his heroic brother's demise. Ravana was shocked and had for a while lost his consciousness.

On the other hand, Sita experienced a sense of coming good. She was delighted to hear later that Kumbhakarna was killed by her husband.

When Rāvaṇa came to, and inconsolably lamented the death of Kumbhakarṇa, Trisira spoke to him words of cheer and encouragement.

HEROES

Rāvaṇa had a false feeling of euphoria: destiny was leading him to his sad end. He thought Trisira and others among his commanders could lead him to victory. His four **min** including Atikāya, also assured him of victory. Rāvaṇa sent his fighters Matta, Yuddhonmatta, Mahodara and Mahāpārśva to go and attack Rāma. They followed Rāvaṇa's **min** shouting: "Great victory or heroic death!"

The monkeys saw the demons coming under the lead of Atikāya. A great battle ensued between them. When a Rākṣasa hero, Narāntaka, **ran** amuck, the vānaras were scared and took to their heels.

Seeing the flight of his men, Sugrīva asked Aṅgada to take **on** Narāntaka. Aṅgada went unarmed to fight with Narāntaka.

Neither the spear of Narāntaka nor the arrows of his aides, Trisira and Devāntaka, could at first subdue Aṅgada. But when the uneven fight became too much for Aṅgada, Hanumān and Nīla went to his aid and killed the Rākṣasa heroes.

Meanwhile the monkeys who were driven away by Atikāya approached Rāma for succour. Rāma assured them help, and asked Vibhīṣaṇa to tell him all about Atikāya.

ATIKĀYA

Vibhīṣaṇa replied: "Lord, he is the offspring of Rāvaṇa's union with nymph Dhānyamālinī. Besides his noble heritage, he has acquired great skills through penance. Brahmā granted him **an** unpierceable armour and a chariot. He has to his credit victories **over** the divine Indra and Varuṇa. You must kill him yourself."

As Atikāya advanced into the monkey ranks, the vānara commanders ran helter-skelter.

Rāma saw it all and was thinking about what action to take.

Atikāya addressed him: "Rāma, I have come fully armed. It is not my policy to fight with ordinary soldiers. Let the heroes among you face me if they dare."

Lakṣmaṇa was provoked by these words and challenged the demon. Atikāya warned him that he was playing with fire in opposing him. Lakṣmaṇa replied: "Stop your self-praise and, if you can, use a little action. Here I am eager to taste your blood."

There ensued a bitter, severe fight between the two. At last Atikāya managed to wound Lakṣmaṇa's chest with a pointed arrow. But he was not seriously wounded and retaliated with a charmed arrow of his own. The demon had an answer to that. When several more hits failed to hurt Atikāya, Lakṣmaṇa was momentarily nonplussed. Then the God of Air advised him: "Lakṣmaṇa, Atikāya has an unpierceable armour presented by Brahmā. Only a Brāhma weapon can bring him down."

Thanking the god, Lakṣmaṇa did accordingly, and the *Brāhma* weapon cut off the demon's head. The monkeys praised Lakṣmaṇa.

The Rākṣasas wept and went up to Rāvaṇa to convey the sad news. Rāvaṇa wailed for a time and then declared: "Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa do not seem to be ordinary mortals. They could even free themselves from the mighty trap set by Indrajit's Brahmāstra. We must protect the Aśoka garden and the Laṅkā city with greater care. Let some of you go and find out the weaknesses of the foe."

INDRAJIT

Then Rāvaṇa was silent. He was still grieving for the loss of his beloved brother Kumbhakarna and of one of his valiant sons, Atikāya.

Then Indrajit approached his father and said: "Lord, there is no time for sentimental regrets. For us heroes, death on the battlefield is equal to victory, for thereby we go to Heaven. When you have such fighters as I in your command, why should you fear

mere mortals like Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa? Give me a chance proving again the valour I displayed against angels and demigods, against Indra and Hanumān."

Rāvaṇa granted his son's wish.

Indrajit went forward to the battlefield, accompanied by all the ranks of his army. Before actually leaving, he performed various rites and offered several sacrifices so as to attain and retain invincible divine powers as a fighter.

Indrajit was well pleased with himself and duly encouraged his men to live up to their reputation of bravery.

While the soldiers on both sides were engaged in a battle of attrition and annihilation, Indrajit attacked the vānara chiefs: he struck Gandhamādana with eighteen arrows; Nala with nine; Mainda with seven; Gaja with five; Jāmbavān with ten; Nila with thirty—all of whom were consequently wounded and made insensible.

Not content with all that, Indrajit proceeded to disarm and defeat Sugrīva, Aṅgada, Rṣabha and Dvivida, too. Blood was flowing like water all over; the cries of the wounded monkeys rent the air.

Seeing their predicament, Rāma addressed Lakṣmaṇa: "Brother! Indrajit, thanks to his boons from Brahmā, had rendered our army helpless. He is actually employing his unique Brahmāstra with great strategy—he has the power of becoming invisible when he chooses and he is exercising it often. This is the time for thoughtless retaliation; we must for a while have recourse to strategy. We must allow ourselves to be rendered unconscious by the force of Indrajit's Brahmāstra."

Accordingly, Indrajit was able to make the royal brothers his insensible victims. Indrajit went back to his father and boasted of his great feat.

But Vibhīṣaṇa was unhurt and undefeated yet, as he did not appear on the battlefield. He, along with Hanumān and other vānara commanders, were out of Indrajit's sight.

Now arriving in the field, Vibhīṣaṇa saw that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were quite alive. They also saw that some of their greater heroes were not dead; but they found no trace of their oldest warrior Jāmbavān.

THE NEXT STEP

They realized that it was absolutely essential to look for Jāmbavān, the indispensable wise old leader. At last Hanumān and Vibhīṣaṇa found him at a lonely spot.

Vibhīṣaṇa gently accosted the severely wounded and bleeding old warrior. Jāmbavān replied in a weak tone that his end was at hand, and he inquired after Hanumān.

Vibhīṣaṇa was surprised by Jāmbavān's special concern for Hanumān.

Hanumān himself heard the kind inquiry of Jāmbavān and bowed to his elder's feet. Vibhīṣaṇa could not suppress his curiosity and asked Jāmbavān why he singled out Hanumān—even to the exclusion of Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Sugrīva and Aṅgada.

Jāmbavān said: "If Hanumān remains alive, all others will be safe. For, he is not only as fast as the divine bird Garuḍa, and as powerful as the God of Fire, but he is also capable of putting to good use these qualities of his in the hour of need."

Hanumān thanked the great warrior; he also told himself that it was at Jāmbavān's suggestion that he was deputed to look for Sītā, thereby covering himself with glory. Now he went nearer to Jāmbavān and pulled out the arrow stuck in his body. Slightly relieved, Jāmbavān addressed Hanumān: "Dear friend, cross this sea and fly up to Himālaya. There you will see the mountain ranges of Kailāsa and Rṣabha. Between those two mountains is situated the *Hill of Herbs*. There you will find life-giving, bright herbs on all four sides: The first is called *Sanjīvakaraṇi*, which brings back the dead to life; the second is *Viśalyakaraṇi*, which cures ulcers; the third is *Sauvarṇakaraṇi*, which heals wounds without leaving any marks; the fourth is *Sandhānakaraṇi*, which joins severed limbs. Go and fetch a sample of each and revive the wounded soldiers and heroes."

MISSION OF MERCY

Hanumān highly appreciated the worthy task he was entrusted with. He first jumped up to mount Trikūṭa. There he increased his size, and inwardly saying a prayer to Rāma, flew up into the air. Glancing down at various hills and lakes on the way, he soon reached the Himālayas. Passing by the hermitages of great saints and the abodes of angels and demigods, he reached the Hill of Herbs, *Oṣadhagiri*.

But nowhere could he find the herbs. Hanumān was vexed and asked the Mount to reveal the secret. When the Mount remained silent, Hanumān rooted out the whole hill and carried it on his back down south to Laṅkā.

As soon ■ the hill was brought near, Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and the vānaras were revived, thanks to the smell of the herbs. But since the dead Rākṣasas were already thrown into the sea, under the orders of Rāvaṇa, none of them was rescued.

THE BURNING MISSION

After Hanumān replaced the Hill of Herbs in the Himālayas and returned to Laṅkā, he was asked by Sugrīva to carry out another important task---that of burning the city of Lanka, which ■ now deprived of its greater heroes.

As the vānaras, under the command of Hanumān, went about their burning mission, the city of Laṅkā lost almost all the treasures for which it was known, and the people ran out into the outskirts for safety. The animals were equally frightened and they ran amuck.

Rāma broke up the main gate of the city with an arrow.

ANOTHER MIXED FIGHT

Once again the vānaras and the surviving Rākṣasas were engaged in a ferocious battle inside the city.

Sugrīva ordered his men to break up the golden gates of Rāvaṇa's palace.

Rāvaṇa asked the sons of Kumbhakarna, Kumbha and Nikumbha, to fight the monkeys. To assist them, he sent his warriors Yūpākṣa, Śoṇitākṣa, Kampana and Prajaṅgha.

While the soldiers on both sides were attacking one another with indiscriminate fury, the heroes were concentrating on duels. In one such, Kampana at first succeeded in hitting Aṅgada with his mace. But soon Aṅgada recovered from the blow, and crushed the demon to death by throwing a big boulder at him.

Then Aṅgada turned to attack Śoṇitākṣa. Yūpākṣa and Prajaṅgha helped the demon; Mainda and Dvividā helped the monkey commander.

KUMBHA ■ NIKUMBHA

When Kumbha and Nikumbha began to attack him, Aṅgada ■ hurt and lost his consciousness.

Jāmbavān, Suśeṣa and Vegadarśi joined the fight and took ■ Kumbha. Kumbha repulsed their attack, but was visibly weakened. Sugrīva wanted to punish him, but since he did not want to fight with ■ weak foe, he warned Kumbha to take rest for ■ while.

But the proud Kumbha was offended by the advice and hit Sugrīva ■ the chest. Sugrīva saw no reason for mercy and returned the blow with a ■ severe one and killed Kumbha.

Nikumbha took his brother's place. He quelled many a monkey by whirling his unique iron ■ which formerly won him great victories. When Nikumbha hit Hanumān on the chest, his missile ■ broken into pieces, but it slightly injured the great monkey. Hanumān recovered immediately and boxed the demon ■ the chest. Nikumbha tried to lift Hanumān up into the air, but the latter continued his strong-fisted blows to such effect as ■ release himself and at the same time ■ upon Nikumbha. As Nikumbha fell on the ground, Hanumān got ■ to his chest and literally tore him into pieces.

MAKARĀKṢA

Learning about the defeat of Kumbha and Nikumbha, Rāvaṇa sent another hero, Makarākṣa, the **king** of Khara, to fight against Rāma's army.

Despite the bad **omens** that he came across on the way, Makarākṣa **was** at first successful in driving away **many** monkeys. But Rāma's arrows stopped his further progress.

Then Makarākṣa cried: "Rāma, you **are** a heartless **man**. You mercilessly killed my father. Here I have come to revenge him."

Rāma merely laughed at him and repulsed his severest attacks very easily. Makarākṣa lost his horse, chariot and charioteer, besides all his weapons with the exception of his javelin. As a last effort he flung it at Rāma. Rāma's arrows made it futile. Rāma finally unleashed his *fire weapon* and it pierced Makarākṣa and took away his life.

News of Makārākṣa's death reached Rāvaṇa. He saw it **was** time he sent his bravest warrior and son Indrajit to the battlefield.

ENCHANTED CHARIOT

Before leaving for the battlefield, Indrajit offered prayers to the God of Fire and pleased him. His golden chariot drawn by four steeds was awaiting him at the palace gate. The chariot was embellished with divine treasures and weapons, and was shining like a big fire. It has the power of becoming invisible when needed.

By virtue of his Brahmāstra, Indrajit is invincible. Sure and proud of himself, he went forth, and encouraged his followers to put an end to the adventures of the Ayodhyā princes parading in the garbs of an anchorite.

Indrajit engaged Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa in a direct fight. After a while, when the arrows of the mighty enemy became too powerful to endure, he got his chariot become invisible and from that advantageous position attacked the princes with further bravado.

Even when Rāma sent up his arrows into the skies, they were futile because Indrajit caused mists to surround him, thereby making himself completely inaccessible to the hits from below.

At last Lakṣmaṇa lost his patience and cried out that he would use his own Brahmāstra and root out the whole Rākṣasa race. But Rāma advised him against such a hasty step, for it was unjust to punish a whole people for the folly of one of their wicked men. Rāma assured him that he himself would find a way of getting Indrajit and killing him.

A WILY DRAMA

Indrajit is by nature full of wiles. He guessed Rāma's intentions and retreated to the city. Rāma would never kill an enemy in retreat.

Still, Indrajit thought that he would have to face Rāma's wrath sooner or later. So he wanted to pain Rāma in some vile way. He got a life-size dummy of Sītā prepared and hung it at the front of his chariot. It was his aim to cut her into two in the presence of Rāma and his army, thereby making them believe that he killed the noble lady.

Seeing Indrajit back on the front with the terrible sight of an anguished Sītā, Hanumān was terribly grieved and went forward to protect her.

Indrajit saw that even the sagacious Hanumān could not see through his ruse. So he caught hold of the dummy's hair with one hand and with the other was about to cut her trunk into two.

Hanumān could no longer check himself. He jumped on to Indrajit's chariot and tried to push him away from what he thought was to be 'Sītā.' But Indrajit was too quick for him, and making the monkey hero cut up the dummy.

Hanumān was much agonised at the terrible sight. He encouraged his people to go ahead and destroy the Rākṣasas and he himself pulled out a big mountain and threw it at Indrajit's chariot. Indrajit and his charioteer managed to escape the blow.

While both sides were fighting with fierce determination, Hanumān thought he should right away inform Rāma about Sītā's 'death'.

AN EVIL RITE

At this juncture Indrajit, too, left the field for a while and went to the Nikumbhila temple to offer a sacrifice to gods, which would indirectly enable him to kill his enemies through incantation.

Hearing the noise of the skirmishes between Rākṣasas and vānaras, Rāma sent Jāmbavān to aid Hanumān. But they both met each other on their way. Jāmbavān realized from Hanumān's mien that the latter was hurrying towards Rāma to convey some important news.

So, he turned back and followed Hanumān. Hanumān told Rāma about how Sītā was cut into two in his very presence by Indrajit.

Hearing the news, Rāma was struck down with grief and fell in a swoon. All those around him tried every means of reviving him. Lakṣmaṇa was crying at Rāma's feet.

RIGHT AND WRONG

He lamented: "Brother, you always stand by *Dharma*, regardless of consequences. But your allegiance to justice and fair play is not borne fruit. Good and Evil are intangible entities; therefore we humans are unable to judge them as we do the sentient things. But this is no time for magnanimity. You must destroy the whole Laṅkā or allow me to do so."

Rāma was of course still unconscious. At that moment Vibhīṣaṇa arrived there and asked Lakṣmaṇa how Rāma came to be in such a state. Lakṣmaṇa told him what happened to 'Sītā'.

Then Vibhīṣaṇa told him that neither Indrajit nor any other person had the power to kill Sītā, who was the boon of a supernatural power.

NIKUMBHILA TEMPLE

In the meantime Rāma came. Vibhīṣaṇa addressed him: "Lord, Indrajit is engaged in performing a sacrifice at the temple of Nikumbhila. If he successfully completes it, he will be completely invincible. In order to gain time for his rite he seemed to have taken this treacherous step of killing a dummy Sītā. It is not too late now to spoil his sacrifice. If you will kindly send Lakṣmaṇa along with me, I will do the needful."

Rāma complied with his request and asked Lakṣmaṇa to take along with him Sugrīva, Hanumān, Jāmbavān and other monkey heroes, and ruin Indrajit's sacrifice. Lakṣmaṇa bowed to his brother before leaving on his mission.

Vibhīṣaṇa guided them to the temple of Nikumbhila, which was so heavily surrounded by the Rākṣasas as to be invisible from outside. So he suggested to Lakṣmaṇa that he hit the demons with his powerful arrows and scare them away from the place.

Lakṣmaṇa and his army attacked the Rākṣasas who had to flee, after offering a severe resistance. Thus Indrajit was forced to fight again before completing his great sacrifice. He came out of the temple and gathering his weapons and summoning his forces, launched upon another great battle.

The first monkey commander that attracted the Rākṣasas attack was Hanumān. As the angered monkey hero was quelling many of his people, Indrajit asked his charioteer to lead him to where Hanumān was doing so much damage. Indrajit's arrows pierced Hanumān, but the latter pulled them away though they were simple needles. At the same time, Vibhīṣaṇa saw Indrajit's valour must not be underestimated and therefore urged Lakṣmaṇa to use his most powerful weapon against Indrajit and kill him.

When Lakṣmaṇa started showering his arrows on Indrajit, the latter turned away from Hanumān and was on his way to where Lakṣmaṇa was. At that moment Vibhīṣaṇa advised Lakṣmaṇa to that Indrajit be killed before he returns to his sacrificial altar and completes his supreme ritual, which would make him undefeatable.

Accordingly Lakṣmaṇa interrupted Indrajit and challenged him.

ANGRY DUOLOGUE

Indrajit saw that Lakṣmaṇa was accompanied by Vibhīṣaṇa. Realizing that it was his uncle who was masterminding the attack against him, he scolded Vibhīṣaṇa for his treachery to his family and his race, and warned him that those who seek the refuge of the enemies would in the end be destroyed by the enemies.

Vibhīṣaṇa replied Indrajit thus: "Young man, don't pretend that you do not understand my true intentions. Eventhough I was born among the demons I have been granted by the good God to walk in the ways of truth and justice. I tried my best to convince Rāvaṇa of his folly. When he persisted in his wrong-doing I had no choice but to throw in my lot with Rāma, the embodiment of *Dharma*.

"As for yourself, you siding with your wicked father. Since *Dharma* ultimately conquers *Adharma*, your ambitious sacrifice had come to a premature end. Now you going to face death through the agency of Lakṣmaṇa."

Indrajit responded with a threatening gesture: he drew out his sword and asked his charioteer to get nearer to Vibhīṣaṇa. But when he saw that Lakṣmaṇa was all the time covering Vibhīṣaṇa, he threw away his sword and took up his bow and arrows, and challenged the enemy ranks to a decisive fight. He mockingly reminded Lakṣmaṇa about his former victory over Rāma and him.

Lakṣmaṇa replied: "You fool, don't forget that you away from Rāma's wrath and took refuge in your palace. Besides, you resorted to foul play by making yourself invisible during most of the fight. If you really a hero, face me boldly."

Then ensued a bitter duel between them, in which each injured the other with his powerful arrows. Indrajit also hit Hanumān and Vibhīṣaṇa with his arrows. But none of his foes was seriously hurt.

Consequently, Lakṣmaṇa laughed at Indrajit: "Is this all the great effect of the mighty weapons you have been boasting about? Now a measure of my prowess."

Once again the two heroes fought a bitter duel. The whole region seemed to rain arrows. Neither gave in. Vibhīṣaṇa saw the need to do his best to put an end to the exploits of his nephew, but since blood is thicker than water he could not help dropping a tear in commiseration with the heroic youth.

A SAD END

Encouraged by Vibhīṣaṇa, the monkeys killed many a demon. But still Indrajit was unconquered. The mighty son of Rāyaṇa was now so angered at the loss of his soldiers that he put in his best effort yet. His valour was so awesome that even the demigods who were witnessing the fight from the skies withdrew in distasteful disgust.

Lakṣmaṇa, too, was fighting an inspired battle. He already managed to kill Indrajit's charioteer. Indrajit was leading the horses himself with one hand and was fighting bravely with the other.

Now Lakṣmaṇa killed Indrajit's horses and broke the chariot into pieces. Thus the Rākṣasa hero was forced to contrive another ruse. He asked the survivors among his army to keep on fighting till dark, at which hour he could escape to Laṅka unnoticed and return with another chariot. The demons fulfilled his wish, and he was able to come back well-equipped for the fight. He killed many a monkey, and the survivors ran up to Lakṣmaṇa for help. Lakṣmaṇa at last made use of his most charmed weapons. First he broke Indrajit's bow, and when Indrajit replaced it, he again caused it to be snapped.

When Lakṣmaṇa again killed Indrajit's charioteer, the horses themselves cleverly manipulated the direction of the chariot according to their master's plan. Lakṣmaṇa's arrows, directed at them, were made futile by Indrajit. When Indrajit saw that his arrows were not piercing Lakṣmaṇa's armour, he made a target of the latter's forehead. The hit, however, caused Lakṣmaṇa's face to shine brighter.

Then Indrajit hit Vibhīṣaṇa's forehead with three arrows. Vibhīṣaṇa was furious, and swirling his mace felled Indrajit's

horses. Jumping down to the ground Indrajit aimed his great *Śakti* weapon at Vibhīṣaṇa. But Lakṣmaṇa intercepted it and broke it into two. Vibhīṣaṇa in his turn hit Indrajit with five arrows. In the meantime Indrajit's great weapon, presented by Yama, ~~was~~ being tackled by Lakṣmaṇa's weapon, presented by Kubera; both weapons caused earth and sky to meet in one blaze of fire and heat and light, and at last fell powerless on the ground.

Lakṣmaṇa tried his *Vāruṇa* weapon, but Indrajit's *Rudradeva-tāka* repulsed it successfully. Indrajit's *Āgneya* weapon met the same fate against Lakṣmaṇa's *Saura* weapon. Desperate at last, Indrajit unleashed his combined strength of armoury against the foe, but Lakṣmaṇa's *Maheśvara* weapon was more than a match for it.

As the fierce duel was progressing, the demigods circled Lakṣmaṇa as a protective measure. Then Lakṣmaṇa released his god-blessed *Cakra*, saying a prayer to that disc weapon as well as to Rāma. The charmed weapon felt itself doubly blessed because it was now being used for the great purpose of Rāma's victory.

To make doubly sure of his victory, Lakṣmaṇa released the *Brahmadevatāka* weapon also against Indrajit. Indrajit saw his end at last approaching, and in a moment of introspection grieved over the future plight of his parents and his people who depended so much on his valour.

Indrajit, the great warrior, shining brilliantly in his golden armour, went down fighting as bravely as ever. Time and Fate ~~was~~ against him. The *Indra* weapon cut off his head and trunk; the pieces of the brave youth's flesh flew about the battlefield. While the demigods, angels and the monkeys were overjoyed, the Rākṣasas were dejected and retreated into the city.

THE WALL OF THE HEAD

The head of Indrajit, covered with the dust of the earth and with the glory of the fight, spoke out: "Lakṣmaṇa, I am a hero's head. I congratulate you as another hero. Honouring the father's wish is not the exclusive right of your brother Rāma; it is also my

dutiful task and divine right. I always respect justice and fair play. I know Sītā Devī is chaste and noble; that is why I did not touch her but created a dummy. In honouring my father's command I fulfilled my most sacred duty on earth. I only regret I could not fulfil my wish of fighting directly with Rāma. However, convey my respects to him. I have no ill-will in me any more; I shall sing your praises even in hell."

Both Lakṣmaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa were deeply touched by these words and shed tears of sympathy and understanding.

The gods in heaven and the monkeys on the battlefield were delighted at Indrajit's death and congratulated Lakṣmaṇa. The morale of the demons was shattered.

All except Rāvaṇa and his people experienced good omens at the time of Indrajit's death.

The joyous cries of the Vānaras conveyed Lakṣmaṇa's victory to Rāma even before the former went up to him and saluted him. Rāma fondly embraced his heroic brother.

Lakṣmaṇa acknowledged his indebtedness to Vibhīṣaṇa's advice and to the physical support of the Vānaras. All praised his modesty.

Rāma asked Suṣeṇa to heal the wounded monkeys. When the latter placed a herb before Lakṣmaṇa's nostrils, all his wounds were healed; similarly the rest of the commanders and soldiers were cured.

A PARENT'S LAMENT

Rāvaṇa who pinned his faith on Indrajit was severely shaken at the news of his death, and fainted. Coming to, after a while, his heart was further broken by the wails of his queen Maṇḍodarī.

He lamented thus: "Dear son, where have you gone, leaving your parents and people behind? Who will now perform the last rites for your father and your mother? But be assured, brave son, you will be avenged. I will not rest till I kill Rāma and his followers."

Turning to his courtiers he said: "I received an unpenetrable **arrow** from Brahmā, after performing a long penance. Even Indra's Vajra weapon cannot pierce it. Now go and get it; I **will** wear it and kill Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa with the equally invincible arrows I received from the same deity during the fight between gods and demons."

Then he spoke to his ministers: "Indrajit's ruse, in cutting the dummy Sītā, was discovered by Vibhīṣaṇa. He indeed is the great betrayer and murderer of Indrajit who would have otherwise been unconquered. Now I **am** going to kill the real Sītā; I am not going to spare any one of my enemies. Seeing Sītā dead, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa will kill themselves. Then the monkeys will flee from here. We shall see who will then protect the traitor Vibhīṣaṇa."

So saying, Rāvaṇa left for the Aśoka garden in the company of his wives and courtiers. Seeing him, Sītā trembled with fear and realized he was coming to kill her in revenge for the death of his beloved son.

As Rāvaṇa **was** beside himself with rage, his minister Supārśva said: "Lord, you **are** well-versed in all laws of justice and in the scriptures. Surely you know it is not right to kill helpless **women**. Besides, isn't it wiser to enjoy her company through peaceful strategy than to commit **a** murder and thereby lose her as well as your honour? Tomorrow is the new moon day—an auspicious occasion for **the** Rākṣasaś. Go to the battlefield then, **kill** Rāma and **bring** back here **the** conquering hero whom the captive Sītā cannot refuse."

Rāvaṇa heard the minister with patience and understanding. He also remembered the curse on him that his heads would be cut into pieces if he would (again) try to ravish a woman against her will.

Accordingly he returned to the palace. There he brooded over his past follies and present misfortunes. Although conscious of his **own** wrong-doing, he thought it was too late to repent and so decided to fight on.

WISE FOOL

Rāvaṇa commissioned his army to get ready for the morrow's attack.

The next day the demons took a heavy toll of monkey's lives, as the battle progressed. Then Rāma took pity on the Vānaras and himself left for the battlefield. He saw it was time to wield his more charmed weapons. He unleashed his Gāndharva weapon which would at once captivate and annihilate the enemy. The demons were so utterly mesmerised as to be unable even to take a look at their tormentor before dying. Those who survived the onslaught fled for their lives.

Rāma explained to Sugrīva and Vibhīṣaṇa the wonderful power of the Gāndharva weapon.

Rāvaṇa helplessly heard the wails of the women and the children who have respectively lost their husbands and their fathers in the battle, which he and his wild sister Śūrpaṇakhā brought about. Eventhough much of his army was disabled, and he himself lost much of his self-confidence, he had not still learnt the lessons of humility and wisdom. As formerly ordered by him, Mahāpārśva called up all able-bodied men to take part in the fight.

At last Rāvaṇa jumped into the fray himself and enjoyed initial success through his charmed weapons which disabled and wounded many a monkey soldier.

SUGRĪVA'S FIGHT

Sugrīva then took command of the situation. While his men plucked trees and other missiles and handed them to him, he attacked the Rākṣasas mercilessly.

Virūpākṣa, riding a huge elephant, took on Sugrīva. Hit by one of the demon's arrows, Sugrīva lost his patience and with a wild hit killed the elephant. Virūpākṣa jumped down and tried to kill Sugrīva with his sword. Sugrīva wielded a huge boulder in self-defence but just missed repulsing the enemy and was wounded. For a while he lost consciousness; but after recovering

he jumped on to Virupāksha's chest. Virupāksha managed to tear off Sugrīva's armour, but at last succumbed to the fierce blows of the monkey king.

Then Rāvaṇa asked Mahodara to take on Sugrīva. The demon, too, achieved some opening thrusts against Sugrīva, but in the end found his head cut off by Sugrīva's sword.

DUEL

Now it was the turn of Mahāpārśva to attack the Vānara heroes. He rained his arrows upon Aṅgada and other soldiers. Seeing ~~many~~ of the soldiers killed thereby, Aṅgada hit the demon with his huge mace. Gavākṣa, the Vānara commander, killed Mahāpārśva's horses and broke up his chariot. When Mahāpārśva ~~was~~ wounding Gavākṣa and Jāmbavān, Aṅgada went to their rescue. Engaging the demon in a straight duel, he finally killed him with a severe fist hit.

Rāvaṇa hesitated no longer. He told his charioteer that it was high time that he took a ~~more~~ direct part in the fight.

THE GREAT BATTLE

Rāvaṇa's golden chariot has entered the middle of the battlefield. He first wielded the Tāmasa weapon he obtained from Brahmā against the enemy. The Vānaras fled from its onslaught.

Rāma then saw the need to take on Rāvaṇa himself. But Lakṣmaṇa wanted to do battle first; Rāma allowed him to do so. However, Lakṣmaṇa's missiles ~~were~~ successfully countered by Rāvaṇa.

Then Rāvaṇa began hitting Rāma with ~~his~~ arrows. Somewhat ~~hurt~~ by them, Rāma used ~~his~~ Rudra weapon against Rāvaṇa, which proved futile against Rāvaṇa's unpierceable armour.

Then both the heroes began unleashing their ~~most~~ charmed weapons against each other. Rāvaṇa's *Asura*, *Raudra* and *Saura* weapons respectively battled with Rāma's *Āgneya*, *Gāndharva* and *Dīvyā* weapons.

When Rāvaṇa attacked the vital organs of Rāma with ten arrows, Lakṣmaṇa again joined the fight, killed Rāvaṇa's charioteer and broke up his chariot. Vibhiṣaṇa then killed Rāvaṇa's horses. Seeing this treachery on the part of his brother, Rāvaṇa hurled his Śakti weapon against Vibhiṣaṇa. But Lakṣmaṇa repulsed it easily. When Rāvaṇa used his more powerful Mahāśak-
ti weapon, it too received the same treatment from Lakṣmaṇa.

Rāvaṇa infuriated and said: "Lakṣmaṇa, you managed to save Vibhiṣaṇa, but you cannot save yourself now. Here again I am throwing the same Śakti weapon at you and it will pierce your chest."

LAKSMANĀ'S SWOON & RECOVERY

Rāvaṇa did accordingly; but Rāma prayed to the Śakti weapon not to wound his brother mortally. Therefore Lakṣmaṇa merely swooned, although he lost much blood.

Rāma pulled out the fierce weapon from Lakṣmaṇa's chest, and, asking Sugrīva, Hanumān and their army to protect him, went forward to punish Rāvaṇa. Rāvaṇa could not withstand this determined attack from Rāma and ran away.

Coming back to where Lakṣmaṇa was lying unconscious, Rāma began to lament inconsolably.

Then Suśeṇa assured him that Lakṣmaṇa was still alive, and turning towards Hanumān instructed the latter to fetch again the miraculous herbs from the Himālayas.

Uttering the name of Rāma, Hanumān flew up to the Himālayan regions, and unable to find the herbs on the 'Hill of Herbs' there rooted out the whole hill and took it to the battlefield. The wise Suśeṇa picked up the needed herbs and placed them near Lakṣmaṇa's nostrils. Lakṣmaṇa came to and immediately spoke to Rāma: "Brother, you are a veritable hero, used to keeping your word. Before evening you will kill Rāvaṇa and rescue Sītā Devī as you said you would."

THE DIVINE WEAPONS

Rāvaṇa returned to the battlefield in another chariot. Indra ~~SAW~~ it ~~was~~ not right that Rāma should fight standing on the ground, while Rāvaṇa rode in his chariot. Therefore he asked his charioteer Mātali to take his golden vehicle to Laṅkā and put it to Rāma's use.

Rāma was pleased with the generous and thoughtful loan of Indra and mounted it. Rāvaṇa was infuriated; he told himself that he would teach Indra a lesson, after killing Rāma.

Again the great battle between Rāma and Rāvaṇa began with terrifying force. Rāvaṇa's *Gāndharva* weapon was repulsed by the same means by Rāma; Rāvaṇa's *Rākshasa* weapon, which sent up hissing snakes, invoked from Rāma the *Garuḍa* weapon which ~~lit~~ up the serpents. This feat further provoked Rāvaṇa, who, then, used his more marvellous missiles, wounding both Rāma and Mātali. Rāma momentarily lost his nerve.

Rāvaṇa felt elated at this temporary success and hurled his javelin at Rāma. The charmed javelin was ~~so~~ powerful that Rāma's arrows were turned into ashes in coming into contact with it. Seeing the plight of his arrows, Rāma suddenly unleashed the *Śakti* weapon Indra sent through Mātali, and it immediately broke up the javelin.

Yet again Rāma and Rāvaṇa fought with all their might and strategy, mocking each other with words at intervals. Their weapons seemed to span both earth and sky in ~~one~~ dimension.

VAIN ABUSE

After ~~a~~ while, Rāma's superior might had its effect on Rāvaṇa. Seeing that his charioteer had removed the chariot from the centre of the battle, with the intention of protecting him from the wrath of Rāma, Rāvaṇa scolded the charioteer: "Fellow, you are an idiot. What made you retreat like this? I am still capable of killing any foe and I do ~~not want~~ to be put to shame in this manner. Lead me back ~~to~~ where that great hero Rāma is, and if I must die I will die valiantly, ~~not~~ like a coward."

The charioteer replied that it was not his intention to disgrace his lord, but that he thought he should give Rāvaṇa a moment's respite from the battle.

Rāvaṇa accepted his explanation and ordered him to drive back to the warfront. He made up his mind that he would not return home until he killed Rāma.

COUNSEL

The big duel between Rāma and Rāvaṇa resumed. Along with the demigods who came to witness the battle, sage Agastya too arrived there. He took Rāma aside and advised him to chant thrice the powerful 'Sun Hymn' which would ensure him success. The hymn is known as *Āditya Hṛdaya* (the *Heart of the Sun*) and has both physical and metaphysical significance in that both the solar energy and the source of the earthly life and the *light of lights* (*Tejasāmapi Tejasvī*) that transcends the earthly illumination are once eulogised in it.

Rāma did accordingly, and a new force and energy entered into him. He alerted Mātali to lead his horses skilfully

Rāvaṇa showered his arrows on Rāma. Even as he was doing so, many bad omens occurred to him.

Both the heroes began attacking each other's horses, chariot and charioteer.

The angels and archangels watching from the skies blessed Rāma and wished him success. Rāma's *Serpent Weapon* cut off Rāvaṇa's heads; but immediately a new head formed itself into position. This was a mystery which Rāma could not understand, for the same weapon could easily kill other Rākṣasa heroes like Mārīca, Khara, Dūṣaṇa, Virādha and Kabandha.

Rāma and Rāvaṇa continued to fight all over the ground and in the sky and on the hills. At this point they didn't even observe the truce all night.

At last, the charioteer Mātali advised Rāma to use his *Brahmāstra*, which was first given to Indra by Brahmā, then

Agastya by Indra, and finally by the sage to Rāma. Rāma did accordingly and it pierced Rāvaṇa's heart. Rāvaṇa was disabled and, even as he was sinking to the ground, his sight was concentrated on Rāma.

REPENTANCE

In a weak tone Rāvaṇa spoke out: "Rāma, you alone deserve to be called a HERO. I know you are the incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu who takes birth in every age to protect the virtuous and punish the wicked. And yet my destiny led me astray: I disregarded Vibhīṣaṇa's counsel; insulted Sītā Devī; dishonoured Hanumān who came to me as a messenger from you.

"I know your heart is broken because of your separation from your beloved: there is nothing wrong about your intending to take revenge on me with the aid of *Brahmāstra*. I know the god of death is welcoming me and I am going to accept his welcome. I am sincerely sorry for the distress I brought on my people. I hope my sins will be forgiven by the fact that I am dying at your hands."

Then Rāvaṇa saw with his mind's eye that even Sītā was grieving for his approaching end. So he cried out: "Mother, how large-hearted you are that you should feel sorry for this wretched tormentor of yours! You are the noblest of women. Forgive me."

Rāvaṇa felt that both husband and wife were smilingly forgiving him. Raising his hands in salutation to the blessed couple, he died in peace—a peace he never knew in life.

The *Brahmāstra* which killed Rāvaṇa returned to Rāma. The frightened Rākṣasas fled back into the city of Laṅkā. The monkeys danced with joy.

The gods in heaven praised and blessed Rāma.

Rāma himself sighed a breath of relief. He was sorry for Rāvaṇa who was a prey to wealth and desire. He now turned his thoughts to Sītā.

Here Vibhīṣaṇa lamented the fall of his brother: "O Rāvaṇa, you who ruled a kingdom, performed a mighty penance, under-

stood all the sciences, and lived a life of splendour, what a terrible end befell you now!"

As he was thus wailing at length, Rāma consoled him, saying that there was no denying the decrees of Fate. Upon which Vibhīṣaṇa requested Rāma to allow him to perform his brother's last rites as befitting a great king and scholar.

Rāma assured him that death drives away all inimical feelings and that he could do his duty to his brother as he saw fit.

RĀKSHASA WOMEN

The news of Rāvaṇa's death reached the city. Rāvaṇa's many wives were inconsolably struck with grief. None could prevent them from running to the battlefield to take a last look at their lord.

As they arrived at the place of death, at first they found it hard to approach him, surrounded as he was with arrows and other weapons. At last they reached him, and each touching some part of his body began to wail: "Lord, if only you respected Vibhīṣaṇa's counsel, you would not have met with this sad end and brought widowhood upon us. Perhaps you were led by the force of destiny."

At this juncture, the queen Maṇḍodarī arrived there. She touched her dear husband's body with its trunk severed from the face and rightaway fell in a swoon. After a while she came to, and lamented thus: "My master, it is incredible that Rāma could kill you, you who conquered even the gods in heaven. Perhaps Rāma came here as the incarnation of God to punish you for your sins. O lord, I should have killed myself even when our beloved son Indrajit died. Now what is left for me in this world without you, too?"

Then the Rākṣasa women began consoling her: "Queen, you know the ways of the world and the fate of mortals. We must all depart this earth sooner or later. So please carry on courageously."

At that hour Rāma advised Vibhīṣaṇa to perform the last rites.

LAST RITES

The battlefield itself became Rāvaṇa's burial-ground. He was cremated with all the pomp befitting ■ monarch and with all the serenity befitting a Vedic scholar.

As Vibhīṣaṇa lit the funeral pyre, to the accompaniment of Vedic hymns, all those that gathered there reflected on the transience of earthly treasures and achievements.

The angels and archangels addressed Rāma from the skies: "Lord, you are indeed the incarnation of God. By meeting his death at your hands, Rāvaṇa has indeed attained beatitude. Let this be the beginning of ■ peaceful era in the kingdom of Laṅkā."

Maṇḍodarī and her friends left for the palace, finally bowing to the funeral pyre.

Vibhīṣaṇa stood with folded hands before Rāma. Rāma embraced him and congratulated him. Vibhīṣaṇa ■■■ at once filled with joy and sorrow—the one for bringing together Rāma and Sītā, the other from his brother's death

Rāma gave Mātali many gifts, and asked him to convey his gratitude to Indra.

CORONATION

Rāma then called upon Lakṣmaṇa to initiate the ceremonies for the coronation of Vibhīṣaṇa as the ■■■ king of Laṅkā.

Lakṣmaṇa gladly accepted the commission, for he was grateful to Vibhīṣaṇa who was instrumental in helping him kill Indrajit.

Accordingly, he ordered the Vānaras and the Rākṣasas to decorate the city for the celebration.

After the streets were properly embellished, Vibhīṣaṇa, Lakṣmaṇa and others went up to the palace—as the cheers of the citizens followed them.

While the priests were chanting the hymns, Lakṣmaṇa anointed Vibhīṣaṇa and crowned him king of Lāṅkā. Addressing the people of Lāṅkā, he told them that it was Rāma's wish that Vibhīṣaṇa should succeed Rāvaṇa and that they would be assured of peace and prosperity during Vibhīṣaṇa's reign.

The Rākṣasas were pleased that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were not bent upon revenge and they danced with joy.

Lakṣmaṇa conveyed the news of the coronation and the celebrations to Rāma. Vibhīṣaṇa offered to Rāma all the gifts he received from his people, but Rāma returned them with thanks to Vibhīṣaṇa.

Then Rāma turned to Hanumān and asked him to convey the news of his victory to Sītā in the Aśoka garden.

Hanumān was much gratified, because he was now able to fulfil his promise to Sītā. As he entered the garden, Sītā was grieving. But as soon as she saw him her face beamed with smiles. He told her all that happened and conveyed Rāma's message.

Hearing it all, she was pleased but kept quiet.

Hanumān was perplexed and asked her why she was silent. She replied that her silence was partly due to her happiness and partly due to her inability to reward him for the good news he brought her.

Hanumān said that her mere words were enough reward for him and that he valued them more than all the diamonds in the world.

Sītā praised him for his courage, fortitude and loyalty.

He thanked her and said: "Mother, all my wishes are fulfilled except one. Permit me to punish these demonic women who have all these months tortured you."

Sītā replied: "Hanumān, you must not think of vengeance now. They only obeyed their master and I had to suffer my fate. Besides, good men never retaliate when the wicked do them harm. As an illustration let me tell you a little story."

PARABLE

“Once upon a time a man who was chased by a tiger took refuge in a tree. As he climbed up he saw a bear there. He realized his plight. The tiger asked the bear to push the man down. But the bear refused, saying that it was his duty to protect those who seek his refuge.

“After a while the bear fell asleep. The tiger then asked the man to push the bear down so that he could eat him up. The ungrateful man tried to push the bear down but failed because the bear woke up and hanged on to a bough. Then the tiger suggested to the bear that the latter would be justified in killing the man. But the bear said that it would be a greater deed to do a good turn to those who harm one, for thereby one would be able to reform the sinner (who would otherwise go on sinning).”

Hanumān was much impressed by Sītā's words and said: “Mother, you are really the worthy spouse of Lord Rāma. Forgive me for my petty feelings, and give me whatever message you have for Rāma.”

Sītā replied: “I have no other message than the wish to see him. Please tell him that I await his arrival here and thank him, Lakṣmaṇa, Sugrīva, Vibhīṣaṇa and others for me.”

Hanumān returned to Rāma and conveyed Sītā's words to him.

THE FIRE TEST

Rāma found himself in a quandary. He could not very well take back Sītā after the abduction she went through, for fear the people might think him a weakling or a cuckold. On the other hand, he knew in his heart of hearts that Sītā was blameless, and he had not the heart to reject her for no fault of hers.

After some careful consideration he instructed Vibhīṣaṇa to escort Sītā to where he was, after seeing to it that she was bathed and bedecked duly for the reunion.

Vibhīṣaṇa gladly hurried to Sītā, and instructed the Rākṣasa women to arrange the purifying bath. After the necessary toilet was gone through, Sītā left in a palanquin for her reunion with Rāma. Even the terrible Rākṣasa women were filled with grief at parting with that noble lady who forgave them their trespasses. Vibhīṣaṇa escorted Sītā to where Rāma was. Rāma did not display the enthusiasm and delight that was natural at the meeting of lovers who were separated for a long while. Vibhīṣaṇa could not understand the reason for this misdemeanour.

Rāma asked the Vānaras and the Rākṣasas to withdraw from the scene. But as they turned their backs, he thought it would be better he tested Sītā in their presence, and so he recalled them.

Then Rāma asked Vibhīṣaṇa to bring Sītā before him. Sītā approached her Lord and noticed no signs of pleasure on Rāma's countenance. She was perturbed, and said: "Lord, I salute you. At last I am able to see you. I have been living these last many months only in the hope of seeing you again."

All those assembled were deeply moved by her words; but Rāma seemed to be unmoved. Rāma had no misgivings about Sītā: he was sure she would come through the test successfully, and so was determined to let her go through it, in order to satisfy popular opinion.

So he addressed her: "Dear Sītā, I have punished Rāvaṇa who had disgraced both you and me. But I fought with him not merely to save you, but to redeem the reputation of my brave clan. I know you are pure, but I have to prove to the world that you were unmolested during your sojourn in Laṅkā."

Hearing these words, Sītā was taken aback and swooned. All the assembled people were grieved that such a chaste woman, who was weak after going through the ordeal of living in captivity, should have been put to such a test.

Regaining consciousness after a while, Sītā pleaded that her thoughts were always concentrated on Rāma and that it was not fair to suspect her. She, however, assured Rāma that she was prepared to go through any test he prescribed.

When Rāma suggested that she enter ■ burning furnace (meaning thereby, that if she came out of the fire unscathed she would be considered pure), she readily fell in with his wishes, and assured Lakṣmaṇa and others who were grieving for her that she would be all right.

Lakṣmaṇa prepared the fire. Sītā Devī, the beloved daughter of King Janaka, who found her in ■ ploughshare (she was conceived immaculately by Mother Earth), went around the fire thrice and bowing to the God of Fire declared: "Lord Agni, thou art merciful. But if I have ever sinned consciously or unconsciously, do burn me. But if ■ am innocent save me."

Kubera, Yama, Indra, Varuṇa, Lord Śiva, Brahmā and other gods came down from heaven to witness the fire test. Lord Agni assumed the shape of a man and lifting up Sītā from amidst the flames offered her to Rāma with these words: "Rāma, take back this chaste lady. Rāvaṇa had a curse on his head that it would break into million pieces if he ever tried to molest an unwilling woman. Your beloved wife is even purer than myself. May God bless you both."

ECSTASY

Rāma thanked Lord Agni and addressed all the heavenly visitors thus: "I know that Sītā is innocent. But ■ had to prove this fact to the world, for fear the people at large would think of ■ as a weak-kneed sensualist who took back his wife after she was abducted by another man. I also knew that Sītā would succeed in this fire test."

Taking Sītā's hand he said: "Beloved wife, your character indeed is the most exemplary in the universe. I ■ lucky in having a wife like you and in receiving you back as a fire-sanctified lady."

Both husband and wife shed tears of ecstasy: as Sītā bowed to Rāma's feet, Sītā's tears fell on his feet and his on her head. The whole assembly praised and blessed the divine couple. They did not know how to thank all those who thus congratulated them.

Then Lord Śiva said: "Rāma, you are the incarnation of God. You took birth on earth to ~~remove~~ this thorn, Rāvaṇa, in its side.

You have fulfilled your mission here. Now you must go back to Ayodhyā. Bharata is eagerly awaiting your return. When you return you must perform Aśvamedha (horse-sacrifice).

“Now look closely into this heavenly airplane. He for whose sake you went through all these sufferings and sacrifices, your father, is here in his disembodied spirit. Please salute him and receive his blessings.”

Sitā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa then went forward and bowed to Daśaratha's feet. Daśaratha was much gratified and, addressing Rāma, said: “As I see you now I am reminded of a little story. Once upon a time there was a scholar named Ekapāda in the court of King Janaka. Varuṇa's son, Nandi, defeated him in a philosophical dispute. But later the son of Ekapāda conquered Nandi in a similar debate and avenged his father. Such sons are worthy of their fathers' love. You are the greatest example of filial love and you made me feel blessed.”

Rāma replied: “Sir, you know all the laws of justice and fair play. When queen Kaikeyī asked for my exile, you were angry with her and with her son Bharata. Please change your mind about them, for Kaikeyī had always loved me and brought me up as a child and now Bharata rules the kingdom as my representative of mine.”

Daśaratha accepted the wisdom of Rāma's words, and all those present praised Rāma's magnanimity.

Then Indra told Rāma: “We haven't come here merely to witness your victory. He would like to do you a good turn. Please ask of me anything you like.”

Rāma replied: “Lord Indra, you are really generous. With your help I succeeded in my efforts. But many of the Vānaras who helped me are seriously wounded. Please grant that they regain their original bodily perfection and also that their descendants at all times would be provided with fresh water and plenty of fruits.”

Indra granted Rāma's wish, and even revived those that lost their lives. He said: “Please send back these monkeys to their homes, for their wives and children are missing them much. And

you, too, must return home soon and rule the people as they wish you to."

The heavenly visitors returned to their abodes.

In the meantime Vibhīṣaṇa made arrangements for Rāma's change from the battle-dress into silken garments. But Rāma was more bent on seeing Bharata than receiving such hospitality. So he thanked Vibhīṣaṇa for his kindness, but said that he should not think of fresh raiments till he got back to Ayodhyā.

Vibhīṣaṇa said: "Our kingdom of Laṅkā is sanctified by the dust of your feet. You are free to use the Puṣpaka plane that Kubera presented to Rāvaṇa, and it will take you back to Ayodhyā in no time. But meanwhile allow me to honour duly other heroes in your party who have helped liberate this kingdom from the tyranny of Rāvaṇa."

PUṢPAKA

Rāma agreed to the Vānaras' being honoured by Vibhīṣaṇa.

After that, Vibhīṣaṇa, Sugrīva, Hanumān and other heroes expressed a wish to accompany Rāma to Ayodhyā and see his coronation. Rāma, of course, wanted to invite them even before they themselves asked, but he did not want to prevent their quick reunion with their kith and kin. Now he welcomed them heartily to Ayodhyā.

And ■ Sita- Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa left for Ayodhyā in the company of their devoted friends

Puṣpaka was such a huge plane that it could easily carry so many passengers.

REITERATION

As the plane was flying, Rāma pointed out to Sītā the complete route he followed on his journey to Laṅkā from Kiṣkindhā.

As soon as they reached Kiṣkindhā, Sītā thought that it would be right that they took along with them to Ayodhyā the wives of the vānaras. Therefore they halted there, and Sugrīva went into the city to convey Sītā's message to the vānara women.

Tāra, Rumā and other women agreed to Sītā's gracious proposal and they all left for Ayodhyā.

From Kiṣkindhā again, Rāma pointed the various places at which they sojourned during their exile.

At last they reached the outskirts of Ayodhyā, and Rāma said: "There, dear, is our beloved city and the beautiful Sarayū river! We have successfully completed the period of our exile and are returning home at an auspicious moment."

As they touched the ground, the newcomers to the city were delighted to see the grandeur of Ayodhyā.

BHARADVĀJA'S FEAST

But before actually touching down at Ayodhyā, they stopped for a while at the hermitage of Bharadvāja to receive the saint's blessings.

The sage received the party with due ceremony. Rāma inquired about the safety of the people of Ayodhyā during his absence.

The sage said that Bharata ruled on Rāma's behalf with the good of the people at heart, and the whole country was flourishing prosperously. He thanked Rāma for stopping at his hermitage, and asked the prince to seek any favour he liked.

Rāma requested that the sage make the trees on their way yield delicious fruits for the benefit of his Vānara followers. The sage said 'so be it', and the monkeys were delighted to see increasingly fruitful trees, and had their fill of honey and fruits.

Then Rāma asked Hanumān to go and meet Guha and tell him all that happened. He also asked the Vānara chief to proceed

from there to Nandigrāma where Bharata was dwelling and to inform him also about everything.

Guha was pleased to see Hanumān and hear the good news. He pointed the way to Nandigrāma.

NANDIGRĀMA

Hanumān feasted his eyes on the beautiful terrain on the way. Reaching Nandigrāma, he saw a simple cottage. Therein he saw a bright figure clad in sack-cloth. Even the royal figure's advisers were dressed in saffron cloth suggesting that they were all doing their worldly duty in a spiritual manner.

On a pedestal were to be seen Rāma's sandals, which were enthroned by Bharata and, representing which, he ruled the kingdom in Rāma's absence.

Hanumān could easily recognise Bharata. Bharata welcomed Hanumān. Hanumān conveyed Rāma's message to the prince.

BHARATA

Bharata heard Hanumān with supreme satisfaction and joy. But since he had not formerly met Hanumān, he wanted the monkey-god to reveal his identity and accept gifts of gold and damsels, as thanks for the good tidings he brought.

Hanumān laughed within himself. Thanking Bharata for his kind offer, he told about himself and about his vow of lifelong celibacy.

Then Bharata sent for Śatrughna and repeated the glad news that Hanumān brought. He commissioned his younger brother to prepare the city of Ayodhyā for a grand welcome to the returning heroes and Sītā.

WELCOME

Śatrughna made all the arrangements, and from Nandigrāma to the city of Ayodhyā it was a feast for the eyes to tread the path.

Rāma arranged with Hanumān that if the latter didn't return before stipulated time from Nandigrāma to where they were temporarily stopping, it would mean that Bharata was prepared to yield up the kingdom to Rāma, thereby suggesting that Rāma could enter the kingdom of Kosala.

Bharata and followers were eagerly looking forward to the arrival of Rāma and his party. Rāma's arrival was a little delayed because he allowed the monkeys to feast themselves, to their hearts' content, on the fruits and honey the wayside trees yielded.

At last the Puṣpaka plane was sighted, and the joy of the waiting people knew no bounds. As the plane touched down, a resounding cheer of welcome went up from the welcoming people. Bharata embraced Rāma and thanked him for keeping his promise. Rāma blessed and congratulated Bharata on his loyalty.

Then Bharata saluted to Sitā's feet and greeted other guests including Sugrīva and Vibhīṣaṇa.

Vibhīṣaṇa complimented Bharata on his selfless devotion to Rāma.

Śatrughna also saluted his elder brothers and sister-in-law and bade welcome to the other guests.

Bharata further thanked the Vānaras for the help they gave Rāma and offered them many rewards.

In the meantime the queen-mothers, Kausalyā, Sumitrā and Kaikeyī, arrived there. Rāma first bowed to them, and then the others followed suit.

As they all reached Ayodhyā the people sang Rāma's praises and gave him such a welcome as had never before been seen in the history of the town.

When they entered the castle, Bharata put Rāma's sandals on the latter's feet and requested him to accept his rightful place as the ruler of the Kosala kingdom.

Rāma thanked him again. He asked his men to return Kubera's Puṣpaka airplane to him. Then he saluted the sage Vasiṣṭha.

CORONATION

Now everything ~~was~~ being made ready for the crowning of Rāma. Bharata ordered his men to fetch waters from the seven seas to enable Rāma bathe in all of them.

The court was splendidly decorated. The diamond-studded throne shone in divine glory. Vasiṣṭha led Rāma, and Sumantra led Sītā to the throne, to the accompaniment of Vedic hymns.

Then Vasiṣṭha asked seven other sages—, Vāmadeva, Jābāli, Kāśyapa, Kātyāyana, Suyajña, Gautama and Vijaya—to sprinkle the sacred waters ~~on~~ the royal couple.

At that instant, the gods from heaven came down and blessed Rāma and Sītā.

Finally the court priest and teacher, Vasiṣṭha, placed the gemfilled, sparkling crown on Rāma's head to the accompaniment of wild cheers from the assembled people. Śatrughna held the white umbrella over the heads of Rāma and Sītā. Sugrīva and Vibhīṣaṇa fanned them with feathered fans. At Indra's behest, the god of Air (Vāyudeva) offered ■ golden necklace and ■ diamond-studded ornament to Rāma. The heavenly singers sang and the celestial nymphs danced.

It ~~was~~ indeed a sight for the gods. The whole nature in the kingdom blossomed with renewed flourish and splendour.

PEARL NECKLACE

Rāma presented various ~~ornaments~~ and jewels to the invited visitors and to the friends he made during his exile—a golden chain to Sugrīva, a gem-studded bracelet to Aṅgada, and holy garments to Hanumān. As he was making his gift to Hanumān, Rāma looked meaningful at Sītā.

~~Sītā~~ removed a pearl necklace from her neck and was glancing at Rāma for ■ suggestive nod. Then Rāma advised her to present it to whomsoever she considered ~~to~~ be the bravest, the gentlest and the wisest of the whole gathering. ~~Sītā did not~~ hesitate even a

second to adorn Hanumān's neck with it. The assembly cheered wildly, showing their acceptance and pleasure.

Hanumān indeed is the best and the luckiest of all devotees.

Later the citizens were feted and the deserving poor were richly rewarded. In the feast in the palace, Rāma and Sītā were at the chief guests and hosts. Kausalyā especially was the most energetic hostess and delighted queen. She congratulated Hanumān and blessed him. Hanumān bowed to her feet.

THE EXEMPLARY FRIENDSHIP

Sugrīva embraced Rāma and said: "Lord, I cannot bring myself to leave your presence. But duty calls me back to Kiṣkindhā, which I won with your kind help. But I shall always cherish the memory of your love and affection. I pray to God for your prosperity and take my leave of you."

Rāma replied suitably and thanked Sugrīva again for the help his friend rendered him.

Vibhīṣaṇa took leave of Rāma in similar manner, promising to follow Rāma's example in ruling Laṅkā. Rāma blessed him.

Hanumān said:

*"Dehabuddhyā'smi dāso'ham jīvabuddhyā tvadarṇśakaḥ,
Svātmabuddhyā tvamevāham iti me niścitaṁ matiḥ."*

When I identify myself with my phenomenal being, I am your servant; when I think of my ego, I am a part of you; and in my ~~inmost~~ of my inmost soul I am one with your supreme spirit.

"I am naturally grateful to you for the lovely gifts you and Mother Sītā showered on me, but I value more your affection for me. Permit me to assure you that I will lead my life with thoughts of you and that I will readily fly to you whenever you think of me and want to see me."

THE NOBLE BEING

Rāma was much moved by Hanumān's words and embraced him fondly. He said: "All that I can offer you in return for your unstinting devotion is the highest place in my heart among my devotees. Just as you promised to see me when I want you to, so I promise you that I will appear before you whenever you want me to. Besides, I want to tell you also that you are ■■ immortal."

Then Hanumān bowed to Sītā and spoke of his fortune in having been able to serve her. She replied that it was equally her good luck in having such ■ devoted follower, and blessed him that uttering his master's name would for ever protect him and his thoughts.

FAREWELL

Thus the various visitors from Kiṣkindhā and Laṅkā went their several ways, leaving ■■■ indelible impress upon Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā of their friendship and affection.

After unwillingly parting from them, Rāma told Lakṣmaṇa: "Brother, all these good people have showed ■■ the efficacy of good will and mutual help. I alone cannot undertake the burden of ruling this kingdom. You, Bharata and Śatrughna must share my burden. You specially should be my heir-apparent and crown prince." Upon which Lakṣmaṇa promised his help, but said that Bharata, should be crowned as the heir to Rāma. But, when sent for, Bharata wanted Lakṣmaṇa to receive the honour, leaving for him only the chance of serving Rāma and Sītā without any thought of reward.

However, when Rāma decided in Bharata's favour, the latter agreed to be the crown prince.

RĀMARĀJYA

As soon ■ the coronation ceremony was completed, Rāma performed the Aśvamedha sacrifice.

Thanks to his divine inheritance and his good deeds, in his kingdom there was no want or war. All people were prosperous and all were righteous. There were no widows nor child deaths. In all seasons were to be found fruits and flowers aplenty. The people looked up to Sītā and Rāma as their mother and father respectively, and the royal couple looked upon the people as their children.

PHALAŚRUTI (*Epilogue and Benediction*)

Those who read the story of Rama and Sītā will always enjoy health and happiness.

This Rāmāyaṇa is the first ever poetic composition in the realm of literature. By constantly studying it, the readers will be blessed with the integrity of Rāma, the chastity of Sītā and the humility of Hanumān:

*Dhanyam yaśasyam āyuṣyam rājñām ■ vijayāvaham,
Ādikāvyaṃ idam ca āraṣam purā vālmikīnā kṛtam.*



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